

Transcript - From the Mic Episode 19 - Ben Sachs-Hamilton

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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.

Ben Intro

Mary Wesley Hi everyone - welcome back to From the Mic. You know one nice thing about the dance community is that sometimes it gives people a reason to travel. My friend Ben Sachs-Hamilton and I both grew up and started dancing in Vermont, where I still live, and this past weekend he was in town to call the contra dance in Montpelier. I asked him if he could stop by for an interview!

Ben started contra dancing at 12 and started teaching dances at 15. Since then he has called and organized for dances across the northeast, with a focus on LGBTQ and gender-role-free dance communities. He fosters a welcoming and inclusive space for diverse groups of new and experienced dancers, adding tips on style and safety into his teaching. Ben currently lives in Western Massachusetts but for our conversation, he joined me in my living room!

Here's Ben:

Mary Wesley Ben Sachs-Hamilton, hello and welcome to From the Mic!

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Hi, Mary.

Mary Wesley It's so nice to have you here in my living room. Always a rare treat that I can catch someone in person for these interviews. So I saw that you were calling what I think is...both of our home dances...I don't know how to pluralized that. We both, I think, had formative years at the Montpelier Contra Dance. Is that right?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Definitely, yeah.

Mary Wesley And how was your gig last night?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton It was great. We had a full hall for most of the evening. Lots of enthusiastic new dancers and old timers. Like you said, having grown up in and here in Burlington, done a lot of dancing in Montpelier, coming back here always feels a little bit like going home. And I see lots of old friends, so it's always a fun dance to call.

Mary Wesley That's great. Well, again, I feel lucky that you had a little bit of time when you're on the home front to stop by. We spent some time together when we were both kind of just learning to call in the Mad Robin Callers collective. But it's been a while and I don't know if I ever just sat down and got like, the whole story of your beginnings and how you got involved with this kind of traditional dance. And I know you're involved in other aspects

of the traditional dance and music world, so would you mind just kind of giving a little introduction?

Performing folk dance

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, sure. So my introduction to folk dance was actually through performance, which is a bit of a funny way to come into this world. I had as a kid really loved theater. I went to theater, summer camps and things. And so some of my friends from those activities were involved in this group, "FolkKids of Vermont," based here in Burlington, that did performances of traditional American folk dance—contras and squares—in period costume. Picture like, Little House on the Prairie, long dresses and straw bonnets for the girls and knee breeches and flat caps and suspenders for the boys. And that that group performed locally, but also did these international cultural exchange trips. So at age 13, I was going and performing contras and squares for school kids in Thailand, which was a whole other...We could talk about that for a long time. But that was my that was my introduction to contra dancing. And I didn't really discover the world of modern social contra dancing for years after that. And when I did, it was a bit of a culture shock because dancing for performance is really different. You have to think about, everybody has to do exactly the same thing at the same time. The lines have to be perfectly straight, otherwise it looks like a mess. You know, from the caller's perspective, from the stage looking at a hall full of people, contra dancing often looks like chaos. So it took me a while to relax when I started going to contra dances and just have fun and be open to flourishes and improvisation. But even starting pretty early on in FolkKids, after the first couple of years as a dancer, as a participant in the group, as I got a little older into being a teenager, I started helping with teaching of the new kids, and there was actually a sort of subset of the group that went on a teaching trip to Russia in 2001. We left our costumes behind and we just went to some schools and cultural centers and taught workshops. And so that was my first real dose of what it's like teaching this dance and bringing it to people who've never done it before. And it was so much fun. I guess that's sort of where I caught the calling bug. I went to college at Wesleyan in Connecticut and got involved with the student run contra dance there. And once a semester we had a night that was all student bands and callers. And so I was one of a couple of student callers. And that's where I did my first sort of mainstream modern contra dance calling. Really enjoyed that, too. And so then when I was living back here in Burlington after college and got wind of what you were doing with the Mad Robin Callers Collective, I thought, this sounds like a great idea. For folks who aren't familiar with it, it's a, I think, a fantastic idea of getting a cohort of new and new-ish callers who would get together and practice together and try things out and give each other feedback. And then we ran our own dance series so that we all had a chance to practice with actual dancers and didn't have to call a full evening. We got to share. So each person was only calling a couple of dances and we had someone assigned for each dance to take notes and share back afterwards. And that was just a really great learning experience for all of us. Yeah, I guess I've been calling ever since. I lived in Boston for a few years, in New York City, I'm now in Western MA and I've been calling in all of those places.

Mary Wesley That's wonderful. You know, and I hadn't ever really thought about you starting out as, you know, doing contra dances or the kind of dances that you now call, but doing them as a performance. What was it like to kind of discover this alternate, this parallel universe where people just did that for fun?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah. You know, I don't know if it was the first time, but I have a distinct memory of Folk Kids went to the Old Songs Festival and I remember going to the, the big contra dance hall and just kind of having my mind blown like, "Oh, this is what people do for country dancing outside of the little bubble of this funny little performing group that I've been part of. This is intimidating, but also looks like a lot of fun." And yeah, I never looked back from there.

Mary Wesley Yeah. And it's such an interesting sequence, thinking about what was social dance to begin with and then going through this phase of, you know, performing the folk dance, as a way often to keep it alive. I mean, you see this in tons of different traditions. I mean, like Riverdance, you know, lots of different Celtic traditions are...these dance forms have made it to a performance space, but is still really based in a social experience.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah and the dances we were doing for performance were, you know, what we'd call chestnuts. You know, we were doing Opera Reel and the Virginia Reel and the Lancers Quadrille. There's these classical dances and some new ones written in that style. But yeah, I feel like my sort of learning journey of contra dancing in some ways is a sort of sped up historical journey. Not many people today can say they first learned dancing old fashioned, you know, proper dances and only later learned improper dances and ones that, you know, borrow the figures that modern contra dancing borrows.

Mary Wesley Right. I mean, certainly no one of your age, which, you know...

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Exactly.

Mary Wesley Is it safe to say we're both millennials, I guess? Are we elder millennials now?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton It's something like that. So and dancing to old New England and Quebecois tunes as well. And we had a great band in that group. I didn't really realize at the time how lucky we were to we were traveling with a four piece live band through Thailand and Russia and Vietnam, lugging around a hammer dulcimer and a keyboard.

Mary Wesley Ahh that's amazing. And yeah, I don't know if you want to go into it more, but do you have any memories of how your performances were received in these different places where you traveled?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I don't think they knew what hit them, really. I mean, I don't know what they were told in advance about what these American kids performing dance were going to be doing. I don't know if they expected us to be doing modern American dance or what they even would think that that would be. But yeah, they were generally very enthusiastic. But I think, you know, we were just so new and different. And a lot of the places we would go we'd perform for them, they'd perform for us. We'd do an audience participation dance. We'd get them up doing a circle mixer, and then they'd do an audience participation. We'd do a traditional Thai dance as best we could. And yeah, we were all having fun. Between the language barrier and also being a kid at the time I feel like if I could be a fly on the wall now, I'd probably have a very different perspective on what those trips were like and those cross-cultural conversations.

Mary Wesley But such a wonderful thing to do. And do you feel like those roots of your experience are still shaping who you are as a dancer and a caller today?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I do yeah. I think as a dancer, I still...I've relaxed a lot, but I still have some of the, you know, we, we drilled on how to swing and how to have good strong lines. And some of that is ingrained in me and I do think makes me a better dancer overall and one who pays attention to the whole set. Because again, when you're performing, you have to be watching and coordinating with what everyone else in the set is doing. And I think that helps me as a dancer and as a caller. That set awareness is hugely important. And then the fact that I started little bits of teaching and calling and prompting from very early on in my dancing path. I feel like that's just meant that it's been part of me and part of how I exist in the dancing world. You know, in some cases we actually...for a performance, we all had the dances memorized, but we would have someone standing up at a mic calling just to give that sense in the performance. And that was me for a couple of the dances. And so getting the rhythm and getting used to, you know, giving the calls a couple beats before the figures actually supposed to start. You know I got that sort of built into my muscle memory early so that when I really started calling for public community dances later, that part I didn't have to worry about that. I already knew.

Mary Wesley Yeah that totally makes sense that you...so it must have been like a fairly intuitive step into leading more modern contra dancing.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah.

The Mad Robins

Mary Wesley And I really remember it's so fun to just reminisce a little bit about the Mad Robins and I don't remember what year we started or when you came back but I think we were...was our dance series already up and running? Or were you part of starting the series?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I think it was right around the beginning. It was like 2010.

Mary Wesley Yeah, around then, Yeah, and it was such a wonderful convergence of people who were kind of just in the same place. Knew a little bit about how to do this thing, wanted some community and support and kind of structure to to develop the caller skills. We're so lucky that Luke Donforth was around and Peter Johnson and all the wonderful Robins and I remember when you reached out because I didn't start dancing until after I moved home from college. So we had not crossed paths in the dance world yet. But I just remember being like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so excited that this person is here bringing so much experience." Even though I don't think I ever totally knew about your performing life as a kid too. But you were just already so capable and ready to jump up at the mic and get things going. Do you have other kind of memories of your beginnings calling for modern dances and what that learning journey was like?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I remember starting out, having trouble finding repertoire. You know, not having grown up contra dancing and not having a lot of social connections to other callers. Um, you know, it was finding dances in books and online and I remember it took me a while and most of the dances that I called back in college, I don't call anymore. I don't think they're actually very good. Some some exceptions, but it's definitely you know, that's something that I don't know that we talk about a lot as callers is where you get your dances from when you're just starting. Like once you get a sort of critical mass, then you add things and you take things in and out of rotation over time. But there's a hurdle there. Definitely I remember those student caller nights for the college dances being pretty

nervous and making a lot of mistakes. But also I was among friends. The organizers were my friends. The dancers were my friends. And so the stakes were pretty low. And that felt like a pretty good supportive environment for getting started, as did the Mad Robins. You know, again, it makes such a difference to have that supportive community around you because getting up there and taking the responsibility of being a caller is risky and can be scary because there's all these people depending on you and if you mess up, like, the whole dance breaks down! There are high consequences.

Mary Wesley Yeah. And the way the Mad Robin Callers dance was structured, the fact that it was very publicly a dance that was run by people who were learning to call. And because we all shared time at the mic, that meant we would also all spend time on the dance floor in the course of an evening. So it just had this nice equalizing effect and it just felt like people were in on the whole process, even if they were just coming to the dance. And I think that was a rare gift that we had.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah.

Mary Wesley And so you've continued to do this thing, to call, to dance, to be involved in the community in a lot of different ways, which I want to hear all about. But you know, what's kept your interest?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I think honestly, it's seeing the community that exists around this dancing and seeing how much it means to people and looking back and seeing how many of the close friendships and relationships in my life have come from this community. I want to do whatever I can to support it and help it grow and thrive. And whether that's whatever combination of dancing, calling, organizing, advocating. These people and this community means so much to me. Especially in the last couple of years you know, in the pandemic, there weren't that many dances happening and coming out of it a lot of dances have been requiring masks, which makes all kinds of sense. And I found I really struggle to dance with a mask on. It's hard, it's a lot less fun. And so I haven't been doing as much dancing. I'm doing much more calling than dancing. Um, still organizing as well. And you know, we can talk about that. But I remember early on going to dances and seeing folks who were there but weren't dancing much, maybe at all. They were hanging out on the sides, they were chatting, they were sitting up on the stage. And I thought, "What are they doing? We're here to dance. That's the fun part!" And I've realized since then that it's so much more than the dancing itself. It really is this whole community.

Mary Wesley Yeah, absolutely. And so what are some different ways that you have found joy and meaning, not dancing and not calling? What other parts of the ecosystem are important to you or are you involved in?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, I mean, so starting with the dancing in college, I've found myself pretty much everywhere I've lived falling into some kind of dance organizing role. This is I guess what I do with the activities and groups that are important to me. So the dance in college, the Mad Robins, then when I moved to Boston I got involved with BIDA [Boston Intergenerational Dance Advocates.] I was on the board there for a while, also helping organize the JP gender free dance in New York City, helping out with the Village Contra, which is sort of the sibling dance to JP, also in the the LCFD gender free queer dance umbrella. And more recently I've gotten more involved in that umbrella organization and putting on our dance camp weekends. The LCFD community has ended up being really important to me as a queer dance space and somewhere that a lot of my closest friends dance. And over time I've seen that community grow and change a lot in some

really exciting ways and that is continuing. We didn't have dance camps over the pandemic, we just brought them back. This past summer we had our first camp at Pinewoods Camp and brought in a whole bunch of new excited dancers to our community through that. And I want to do more of that. We're planning for two camp weekends next year and I'm really excited to see where that goes.

Lavender Country and Folk Dancers (LCFD)

Mary Wesley That's really exciting. Can you say a little bit more about LCF...Oh I'm not going to...I feel like I can...Lavender County folk dance?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Lavender Country and Folk Dancers—LCFD. Not, not the easiest acronym to remember. But yeah, it's an umbrella organization for gender free and queer focused dance groups. A handful of local dances as well as our dance camp weekends. These were some of the first dances to both create an intentional safe space for gay and lesbian queer later also trans dancers and also as part of that, to use gender free role terminology. And you know, I think we can take some credit for spreading that to much more of the contra world in recent years. And, you know, a conversation that we've had in the community as that as gender free role terms have spread is, is there still a need for us? You know, have we won? Can we pack up and go home? And the answer is no. There is still a need for this community. It was never just about the role terms. It's so much more than that. It's about a place where queer folks, where trans folks can feel like this is our dance space. And this is where we can bring our full selves. And, you know, our straight cis allies are so welcome and we love having them there. But the core of it is a dance community that is by us and for us and designed for our needs. And there's absolutely still a need for that. And you know, I see that in the fact that young, new queer dancers who especially, you know, in parts of New England have a wealth of opportunities for dancing, almost all of which don't use gendered role terms, are still excited to come to queer dances. There is something different and special about that.

Mary Wesley That's wonderful. I guess I'll step back and say, you know, how has your role grown within that organization? And what were you able to bring into that space given all your experience?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah. So I started out just on the organizing committee for the Jamaica Plain Dance and then took on the role of booking bands and callers for that dance, which was a lot of fun and helped me get to know more people and make more connections, which was then helpful for me growing as a caller as well. It's all, of course, interconnected. And then at some point I took on being the camp registrar for some of our camp weekends. So just running the registration process. I did that for a couple of camps. And then coming out of the pandemic, there was an opening for someone to step up and really make the new weekend happen in the new location. And I decided that was what I wanted to do. So I was the, I don't know, chair of the camp committee. We don't have a lot of official titles. But I did a bunch of the planning, of the programming and figuring out things with the venue. I was really excited. Sam Weiler sort of made the initial connection with Pinewoods, but having volunteered on crew at Pinewoods and having been on staff for CDSS programs there I know the facility really well and I know the LCFD community really well. And I was so excited to bring those together. A lot of long time LCFD folks haven't attended other dance weekends or weeks. Hadn't ever been to Pinewoods. That was a new experience for them. And, you know, Pinewoods has such a special place in my heart. I couldn't wait to share it with these friends. And at the same time, there were

folks who were longtime Pinewoods attendees at various other weeks and were excited for this new program, this new queer focused program, too, to be happening there. I was a little nervous about how these different groups would blend together, especially not having had an LCFD weekend in several years. But everyone was just so excited to be there and so happy to be dancing together. It was one of the best dance weekends I've ever been to.

Mary Wesley That's amazing! Congratulations. And is it continuing?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yes. Yes, we will be back at Pinewoods in June, 2024. And we're also going to have a weekend in the fall next year in October at Ashokan. So that'll be another new venue for us.

Embracing changing traditions

Mary Wesley That's so exciting, and I love that you reflected that the origins of the Lavender Country and Folk Dancers community, you know, was a safe and supportive space for LGBTQ dancers. And that out of that space came, you know, some new traditions, some new practices that have really rippled out into the dance world at large. And especially, you know, you mentioned changing role terminology to be gender free. I'm curious if you see other elements that have been allowed to develop or emerge within those queer dance spaces that maybe are, you know, valuable and relevant for anyone, everywhere.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah. I think, you know, going beyond like I said, it was never just about the terminology, right? There's also a flexibility about which role you dance and a playfulness of dancing both roles, of swapping back and forth if and when you want to, you know, no one no one's ever required to do that. But even there, there's a tradition that has sort of come and gone but has been pretty steady in LCFD, particularly for the English country dancing of lining up without a partner. You just go and join the line on one side or the other. And whoever you end up standing across from is your partner for that dance. And I really like that dynamic some of the time. Other times I like to choose and, you know, dance with my friends or go and find someone new to dance with. But I like that little tradition. And I would love to see more of that. I think, not to, not to overgeneralize, but I think it's always helpful to remember that a lot of the ways that we dance, a lot of the traditions that we have and the assumptions that we make don't need to be set in stone. And we can change them. We can play with them. And I think part of having a queer focused dance space is about questioning assumptions, about questioning tradition, that—and this is true not just in dance. This is true in all sorts of queer communities that once you question some of the basic assumptions about gender and sexuality, that opens the door to questioning a lot of other assumptions that might also be outdated and harmful and worth some critical reevaluation. So I think there's a lot of that perspective that can still be of value far beyond dance role terms.

Mary Wesley Absolutely. And I just find it so fascinating, I mean, this topic of the flexibility, the dynamism, is that a word?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah.

Mary Wesley Yeah, the dynamism of tradition and that so often that word "tradition" is sometimes used to imply some kind of, you know, steady through line. And it is also inherently changeable, adaptable.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, and there are traditions and there are parts of the culture of LCFD that have also needed to be questioned and reevaluated. You know, as there have been more trans dancers, there have been some hard conversations and changes within the queer dance community about how to truly be open and welcoming and affirming of folks of all genders. And that's been tough.

Mary Wesley And important, it's important work and it seems like a lot of willingness on the part of the queer dance community to keep doing that work.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, and I think it's because from the very beginning it was all about being a safe space. It was all about being able to be yourself and the desire for anyone who comes to have that safe, authentic experience.

Mary Wesley Mm hmm. Noting that it is not only about gender role terms, but that gender role terms is something that's on the minds, I think of a lot of dancers, callers, organizers. It's a topic in our community right now. And I'm curious to know how your experience has been watching that evolve and how you've navigated that. Maybe what you've learned being in these multiple roles of dancer, caller, organizer.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah I mean, you know, when I started out, everything was gents and ladies all the time.

Mary Wesley I'm just thinking of your describing your costumes for your kid performances.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Absolutely.

Mary Wesley Very gendered.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, if there was any variation, it would be some people choosing to call "men" and "women" instead. Which...I had a fascinating conversation with Sue Rosen once about how when she was starting out as a caller, "men" and "women" was an intentional choice that some callers made to be more egalitarian and more feminist. That it was considered a more sort of, value neutral description rather than the sort of...that gents and ladies were more laden terms that came with expectations about how you would behave.

Mary Wesley Isn't that fascinating? Like tied to class kind of?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I don't know, but you know, that you would behave like a lady or behave like a gentleman. As opposed to you just are a man or a woman. And that I totally get that. And there's some gender essentialism in there that is also problematic. And then, yeah, when I started going to the dances in Jamaica Plain, I was introduced to the "armbands" and "bare arms" terminology, which you know, looking back is pretty clunky. But also I remember really appreciating it. And you know, just aside from the words themselves, the intention behind them, right? That was the important part. And I do even have some nostalgia for the actual armbands themselves, though they could get a little messy and caught on things.

Mary Wesley Right, because the armbands and bare arms was...there was a prop.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton You actually had a...had what's that stuff called—flagging tape that you would tie around your arm. It made it harder to swap roles in the middle of a dance too. Then you know, there was larks and ravens and then larks and robins and my dance cards are this complete hodgepodge of all terms, some of them with cross outs and things written in again. And, you know, at some point I just stopped updating them. And, you know, partly that was becoming experienced enough as a caller that I felt confident just translating on the fly based on whatever my card said. But it is an interesting history looking back, I can sort of see when I added a card to my collection based on what the role terms are that are written on it. And I actually remember at first I had some resistance to departing from the traditional ladies and gents terms. I see and I sympathize with people who feel the connection between that and the history of the dance form. You know, these are terms that people have been dancing to for many, many years. And for me personally, I thought, "I don't care. I can be a lady. I can be a gent. It doesn't matter. I like dancing both roles and the terms just feel like arbitrary labels to me." And then I talked to friends, particularly friends who are trans and non-binary, who said "It feels really yucky. It makes me feel like I don't want to dance." And I thought, "Oh, if making a tiny change is what makes the difference between someone feeling excluded and feeling welcomed and like they belong, how could I possibly say no?" Like, that's such an easy change to make and it doesn't hurt me at all. And that was really the big turning point for me. And, you know, I already saw them as arbitrary terms. And so I don't care. I'll swap out, I'll use whatever terms people want. I am intrigued by positional calling and the potential of that. I am still, honestly a little scared to try it out myself. I do a little bit of English calling and it's a whole lot easier there. But I do think there's a lot of potential there and a lot of... There's, I don't remember who wrote it, the CDSS pamphlet on positional calling.

Mary Wesley Louise Siddons.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Louise Siddons, thank you. I really like the way that she talks about it. Again, it's never just about the role terms, right? The role terms reflect all of your assumptions about the dancing and, you know, thinking about you're staying connected to your partner and which hand you have free, which hand you have available. Yeah. I'm really excited to learn and experiment and see where that goes.

Mary Wesley It is so interesting to think about how language affects behavior. You know, I mean, you know, I don't have that analytical a mind, but just thinking about how just even changing the role terms gave us an entry point to start talking about who danced which role. And just opened up this whole other, yeah level to, as you said, kind of question everything. And so in a similar way yeah, I think positional calling is just giving, you know applying this whole new filter to think about embodiment, awareness of your space and your position, your relation to other dancers in space. It's so fascinating.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, absolutely.

Mary Wesley I just love seeing these conversations develop. Um, I just because I was thinking about it as you were talking. You kind of spoke to this already, but I was curious if there's anything more. As more and more communities started using gender free terminology, did that change your experience as a dancer at all?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Not much, personally. I think for me, I was never particularly uncomfortable with gendered calling, though I will say these days I so rarely go to a dance that does have gendered role terms, when I do, it's a little bit shocking and it takes me a minute to readjust. And it just reminds me how unnecessary it is.

Mary Wesley Mhm.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Um, but no, I wouldn't say it's made a whole lot. Well actually, I remember going to a contra dance session at the National Modern Western Square Dance Convention.

Mary Wesley Wow!

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Which was a trip. But, you know, it was a very traditionally gendered contra space. And I was dancing with a friend and I was dancing as the lady. And I would say every other couple going down the line tried to "fix us." That happens so much less with non-gendered calling. And boy, am I glad to see it go.

Mary Wesley Absolutely. Yeah, as a caller how do you deal with requests for a particular terminology? For using particular terminology? Do you hold the line of only calling gender free? What's are those decisions like?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Honestly, in the last few years, I don't know that I have called a dance that used gendered role terms, which, you know, I exist in the in the New England bubble. I wouldn't insist on that though, I think. Periodically when I have called dances that are still using ladies and gents I just make sure to say that anyone can dance any role and just hammer that point is as many times as I can over the course of the evening. I think if anyone asked me to not do that, I would have a problem with that. But I don't think that that's ever happened.

Mary Wesley Yeah. It certainly offers, again, an opening for conversation and thought.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I remember the first time I slipped up in reverse calling a ladies and gents dance. And I said something about Robins I thought, "This is actually a good sign."

Mary Wesley That's kind of good.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, that's the mistake I'm making.

Mary Wesley Yeah.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton And all the dancers knew what I meant anyway.

Looking to the future

Mary Wesley Right? They were fine. So what is your caller life like these days? I know you've talked about...we're all still navigating the sort of coming out of the pandemic years. But what's on the docket as a caller and what are you hoping for in the future?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, you know, there's always that tension. I want to do more and at the same time, it sure is nice to have weekends at home sometimes. I've been doing a fair amount of calling locally. You know, living in Western MA, where I'm so lucky that there are a lot of dances that are within easy day trip distance. A few longer distance, you know, maybe a long weekend with a couple of gigs in a few places. Last summer I called at Harmony Week at Pinewoods, which was a great time. I got to to teach a basics of contra

and English country dance class and do some fun comparisons across styles. Yeah, honestly more of the same. I'm just having so much fun.

Caller goals

Mary Wesley That's great. And what's your approach as a caller? You know, what do you think about when you're planning an evening? What do you hope to bring to people?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Recently what I have started saying in my beginner lessons is for me, contra dancing is mainly about four things: it's moving, together, with music, and having fun. And if you're doing those four things, then you're doing it right. And you know, my job is, as the caller is, to help that happen. So it's figuring out what the level of complexity of dances is that is the right match for the crowd. And the level of teaching to go with those dances, because you sort of, in some ways those are two sides of one equation, right? You can get any group to do any dance. It just might take an hour of dancing. And so I you know, going into a dance, if it's a dance I've called before, I usually have some sense of what the crowd is going to be like. If it's an unfamiliar one that I haven't been to before, I'll try to get some "intel" from the organizers or from other folks from that community and put together a program. That's my best guess of what's going to be a good fit. But always having some substitutions in my back pocket, some planned out in advance of like, "Okay, I think I'm going to want to call this dance." But depending on how the couple dances before that go, I might swap it out for this one. And sometimes, almost always, honestly, some amount of reprogramming on the fly just based on how the evening is going. Are the dances running shorter or longer? How big is the crowd? How many newcomers are there? What's the energy level? That's to me, that's the crux of the of the caller's challenge is putting your finger on the on the pulse of the room and figuring out what's next. What does this crowd want? What do they need? Do they want something that's high energy? Do they want something smooth? Do they want something that's going to stretch their brains a little bit? Do they want to just relax and do something comfortable? And even within one dance, you know, as you're calling, you're scanning the room, you're figuring out, do they have this? Do they need a little bit more prompting? Oh, I saw a couple people missed that long lines, next time through I'm going to prompt that one more time. It's this constant adjustment and dynamic and that's the fun part for me.

Mary Wesley Yeah. I often describe it as being kind of in the middle of everything.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah! You know, I was thinking about this last night. The dance I was calling in Montpelier there were, there were a significant number of new or pretty new dancers. And it's not even just how many new dancers there are. There are new dancers who bring all sorts of different kinds of energy. And you really have to read the energy of the group. Are they going to are they new dancers who are going to want to have a lot of careful coaching and otherwise they're going to get nervous and they're going to freeze? Are they new dancers who are just going to throw themselves in and have a good time and figure out where they need to go and follow the people around them? Are they new dancers who are going to, you know, scream and yell and run around and have a great time, but mess up the dancing for everyone around them? Right? There are so many different flavors. And so it's a lot of almost, mind reading. It feels like sometimes of...what does this group need in order to have fun?

Mary Wesley And does your early caller, nervous self ever show up or are you pretty comfortable in that, just kind of living on the edge, trying to knit together all these different things? Have you found a way to be comfortable that space?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I'm always a little nervous. There's always a little bit of the sort of, "Is this going to work? Are people going to have fun? Are people going to blame me if it goes wrong?" But it's also it's the nervous that I'm used to and I know that feeling. And so if this isn't a contradiction in terms, I'm comfortable being nervous. Like, I know what I'm feeling. And I know that it's not going to keep me from doing a good job.

Mary Wesley That's such a relief to hear. I feel exactly the same way. And there's always a lot of anticipation. There's often moments when I'm like, "Oh, that that was the wrong choice, in the moment."

Ben Sachs-Hamilton The thing that I try to remind myself is no one is expecting you to be perfect. And in fact, when you admit when you make a mistake, when you laugh at yourself, it wins you so much goodwill from the crowd. And it also lets them know it's okay to make mistakes. It's okay to laugh at them and move on.

Mary Wesley Absolutely. Yeah, it helps everyone relax when you can convey that. Is there any part of your former folk dance performer self that comes out when you're at the mic or comes through in your teaching?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, I mean, calling is performing, right? You're up on stage. You're projecting this public persona. I've always enjoyed performing. I've enjoyed theater. I worked for a little while as a public school teacher and, you know, that's performing too. I enjoy putting on that role for the evening.

Mary Wesley Yeah. And what about other kind of nuts and bolts things? Do you have ways that you engage with musicians when you're like, walking in for the first time, working with the band that you've just met?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, absolutely. I always try to you know, it can be hard, people are setting up and sound checking. But I try to always have a conversation with the band about what kind of communication they want from me. You know, how do they like to match tunes to dances? What kinds of descriptors will be helpful for them? Do they just want to see the dance card? Do they want me to tell them that I want something smooth or something bouncy or a march or jig or reel? Do they want to know, oh, there's a balance at the top of B1. And that's usually a really productive conversation. I check in, you know, do you do you like to know if there's three more times through the dance. And especially if it's a bigger band, who should I make sure gets that signal? Recently I've been asking, "How many tunes do you play in a set typically?" Because I try to pay attention to that as the caller when I'm timing, how long I'm running the dance and how many more times I want to go through. Or, you know, maybe if I know that they're playing, that they have another tune they want to play and I'm thinking, we're not going to run the dance too much longer. I might signal to them like, "Hey, if you've got another tune, you might want to switch to it now!"

Mary Wesley Yes, it's good to take care of your musicians.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Absolutely.

Mary Wesley Do you ever feel lonely being the caller?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton It's a good question. It can. I think especially the less familiar the context is. If it's a dance that I haven't been to before, farther from home, I don't know the organizers, I don't know the other dancers. I may not know the band either. It can be, yeah, when you're at your home dance or somewhere where, you know a lot of people, you're making eye contact with dancers on the floor. You're noticing...you're more just plugged in to the group. And so, you know, it can be a little distant. But at the same time, even at those dances where you don't know anybody, it can almost feel even better to, when you know that you're helping them have a good time it's like, I don't even know you, and yet I can come in and play this supportive role for you.

Mary Wesley Yeah, and it's always the difference. I mean, the band might not know anyone, but they probably know each other. You know, they have a built in team. So sometimes you're a team of one, but then your role is to bring everyone together.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, and like we were saying, you know, communicating with them, if you can get on the same side, if you can feel like you're on the same team with the band, that makes a huge difference.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Then it gets really good.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Not that...that sounds like you're setting yourselves up in opposition with the dancers.

Mary Wesley I was going to say, get on the same team as the band and then get all the dancers also on your team! Then you're cooking.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yes.

Mary Wesley I have a few questions that I usually end with, but is there anything glaring that I've skipped over?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I think you know, that in addition to exploring positional calling and other fun new things, that the other thing I'm really excited about leaning into more is continuing to build tips on safety and community dancing and better support for each other into my teaching and calling. That's something that's really important to me and I do it a lot. I, you know, for a lot of the dances that I teach I'll at some point along the way, I'll say, "So in this dance, here's a moment where you have a great opportunity to really support your neighbor in doing this." Or, you know, "In this dance notice that it will go a lot smoother if you put your arm this way around your partner." And I hear that people really appreciate that. You know, people will come up to me after the dance and say that. And so I yeah, I just want to continue to find more ways to do that because the caller is not just there to teach the figures, the caller's there to...well, to do all sorts of things. But one of them is to help people be better dancers and better partners and better neighbors on the dance floor. And I feel like that's a unique opportunity that I enjoy and want to explore more.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Do you think about that in terms of leadership? Just the desire to have an impact that's beyond just, just teaching the moves?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah. It's a type of leadership. I think it's a type of contributing to making the dance community that you want to be a part of.

Mary Wesley Mm hmm. Yeah and, I mean, I feel like you've described multiple different ways in which you are doing that. You know, as a caller, as an organizer. I wonder, too, how much as, as someone who is in the queer community and then also is a dancer...did those spaces overlap or blend together? You know...

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I recently listened to your interview with Chris Ricciotti and he talked about the feeling of initially feeling like there was his gay community and his dance community, and there was a real wall between those. And very slowly, gradually, and intentionally working to bridge that and bring those together. And I am so grateful. I feel like I benefit from the work of Chris and folks like him who made it possible to be an out, queer folk dancer and not think twice about it. And, you know, many of my closest friends are out, queer folk dancers. And that community has meant so much to me. And not even just, a lot of them are not particularly connected to LCFD. They go to other dances. They, you know, maybe they're contra dancers, maybe they're morris dancers, and maybe they're queer, maybe they're not queer. But it doesn't feel like there's this divide that needs to be bridged. And I feel so lucky to be living in a time and place where that's true.

Mary Wesley Absolutely. And I love everything you're saying about just finding all the different ways that you can help build a community that you want to see and that you want to be a part of. And I feel very lucky to have gotten to cross paths with you and see what's possible in that way. And I'm really glad that you're out there doing everything that you're doing.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Well, I feel like I've learned a lot from you. I definitely, when I think about the caller persona that I want to emulate, the combination of warmth and precision that I see in your calling, and have for many years, has definitely been something I've looked up to.

Closing

Mary Wesley My gosh, I'm very honored and feel the same way about you. A warm moment! So I have three questions that I usually close with. The first is to talk a little bit about your dance notation. How do you write down and keep and organize your dances that you...your dance collection?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah. So I'm a pen and paper, index card caller. I tried having them on, as electronic documents or spreadsheets. I tried a few different things and nothing was able to recreate the experience of being able to lay out my cards and rearrange them and look at the sequence. And so that's what I've stuck with. I love also seeing, you know, for callers who do use cards, how they keep them organized. How they group them, you know, from easy to hard, or based on feel. These days I group mine based on distinctive figures. I have like, all of my wave based dances and my hey base dances and the ones with Petronella in them. And then, like I said before, they're this sort of great historical hodgepodge of role terms as well.

Mary Wesley Yeah, I love that. Some archive someday is going to have a heyday with that. And do you keep them in a box?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah, an old cigar box that's just the right size.

Mary Wesley Perfect. And how are you finding dances these days? Are you still adding to your collection?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Definitely still adding to my collection. Sometimes I'll go to a dance and, you know, there'll be a dance that I really like. And I'll write it down if I remember it or I'll ask the caller to send it to me. Sometimes I'll realize that there's a gap in my collection, that I want a dance that has this figure, that does this. And so I'll just look online at some of the big indexes and see if I can find something that fits. And I also write my own dances and have a lot of fun doing that.

Mary Wesley Well, we didn't even touch on that. Do you want to say a little bit more?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton I haven't written a ton, but I do enjoy it. I enjoy thinking about the mechanics of how figures can fit together in slightly unexpected ways. There's that fertile ground of, "Oh, this is different and interesting," but not so much that it will really throw people and break the dance. I like playing around with that.

Mary Wesley Nice! I'm going to have to collect some of your dances. I don't know if I have any. Okay, and then do you have any pre or post gig rituals, things that you kind of do to get ready or or wind down?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Not much. I try to make sure I've eaten. That's pretty important. I had a gig recently that I got to late and I didn't have time to eat dinner. Fortunately, one of the band members had an extra banana. Otherwise it would have been a pretty rough evening. Yeah. Eating, staying hydrated, making sure I have the right layers so that I can be the right temperature. Turns out the temperature on stage can be very different from the temperature down on the dance floor when you're not dancing entirely.

Mary Wesley Yes. And then last is, if you know, are you an introvert or an extrovert?

Ben Sachs-Hamilton On balance, I'd say I'm an introvert. The way I understand it is like, when I'm depleted and need to recharge, do I do that on my own or do I do that by connecting with other people. And definitely on my own. It's the, you know, we were talking about performance. And a lot of performers, I think, are introverts. You know, you have your public persona up on stage and then you're off stage and you go back into your shell.

Mary Wesley Yes. That's kind of how it goes for me. But it's interesting that, you know, I've talked to people who are introverted, extroverted or anywhere in between, but I'm just always curious that how it plays into the role of someone who is choosing to kind of, be in charge of a roomful of people.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Yeah. I feel like it's the classic introvert performer thing where you find it a lot easier to be on stage in front of a microphone before a hundred people than you do to actually try to, you know, make small talk with a small group of people.

Mary Wesley Yes. Terrifying. Well, Ben, thanks so much for dropping by.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton And thanks for having me over.

Mary Wesley Yeah. I hope we meet on a dance floor sometime soon.

Ben Sachs-Hamilton Me too.

[*Musical transition*]

Mary Wesley Thanks so much to Ben 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!

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