

## FTM Ep 24 - Rick Mohr - TRANSCRIPT

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**Mary** Hey there – I'm Mary Wesley and this is From the Mic – a podcast about North American social dance calling.

[ *musical transition* ]

Hey there From the Mic friends. Today, we get to talk to Rick Mohr!

Rick Mohr's calling and choreography have delighted dancers for decades, from local barn dances to dance weeks and weekends across North America. Many of Rick's [contra dances](#) are coast-to-coast favorites, which he attributes to persistence in reworking an idea (for days or years) until any minuses are smoothed out.

His earlier dance communities include Boston, Western Massachusetts, New Haven, and Minneapolis. Today in Philadelphia he leads a hybrid contra + barn dance for teenagers, building a unique repertoire to fit their skills and preferences.

In the wider world of traditional music and dance Rick also plays fiddle for contra dances, leads an [open band](#), leads chorus songs, writes [songs](#) and [fiddle tunes](#), leads, plays, and choreographs for [Morris](#) and [rapper](#), and programs dance weeks. These days he's thrilled to play with his wife Chloe and son Evan, performing songs as [Wissahickon Bridge](#) and playing for dances as Wissahickon Express, with Cecelia Tannous-Taylor. Rick and I covered a lot of ground in our conversation so let's dive in.

**Mary** Hi. Rick Mohr.

**Rick** Mary, hey.

**Mary** Welcome to From the Mic.

**Rick** Thank you so much. I so enjoyed listening to the other people talk and glad to see you and have a chance.

**Mary** I'm so glad you're here now. Now you're one of the people who's going to talk, I'm so grateful. Where are you speaking to us from today?

**Rick** I'm in my home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.

**Mary** Nice, well, like so many people, I start at the beginning, and so I like to start kind of broadly and hear a little bit about how you came into the dance world or the world of traditional music. There's so many different ways that people discover this dance scene and its many components. So what was it for you? Where did things start?

**Rick** Well, so I grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and I remember in sixth grade we had square dancing in P.E. and we liked it. And in fact, we got together after the school year ended to do square dancing one time. I just remember that and I remember one of the dances that we did, it was, dip and dive. That call where the record goes [sings] "Dip and dive and away you go with the inside high and the outside low, hurry, hurry, hurry, let's go, it's over then below." So then I totally forgot about dancing until college, I think. There was an old chemistry professor who had records, who ran square dances once or twice a year and I always went to those and then I sang in the choir. I remember at a choir retreat, I called the Virginia Reel, and I have no idea where I learned it or how I thought I could do it, but I just got the people up and we did it. There was a guy who played one tune on the accordion, which he played in six different keys. Anyway, so those are a couple little early things, but what really drew me in was music.

So my sister Carol has always been a Morris dancer, which you and I share. I saw that she played music with her friends and sang songs with her friends, and those both were very exciting to me. And so when I had a chance to join the Minnesota Traditional Morris Dancers in Saint Paul, where I was then going to college, I did and that introduced me to the whole world of contra dancing and fiddle tunes. I played the pipes at Macalester College, the bagpipes, and I was playing the guitar already and the whistle. But through Morris, I started playing the concertina and the melodeon, and just the mix of music and dancing was very exciting at that time. And then the Minnesota Morris team took a tour to New England when the Bampton Morris men were over and that was my first time really in New England and the twisty roads and little towns, it just felt like coming home and where I ought to be. We went to a contra dance in Brattleboro at the Chelsea House, which I remember pretty clearly, just how exciting it was and how everybody was really into dancing.

And then a friend of mine in Minnesota wrote a tune called The 10 Pound Snowflake. which had this place in it where it went [sings tune]. Like that and in my age 25 dancing style we would circle left and do double footed stamps at the end of the phrase, you know? So I thought you could have a dance that really fit that tune. So I ended up making up this dance called the Ten Pound Snowflake. This would be in the early 80s, and then I called it at the Midwest Morris Ale and people actually did it. And again, you know, I didn't really think about it very much. I just kind of got up there and did it. Although I do remember saying, after it was going and it looked like people were sort of doing it, saying you're on your own and hearing, oh, oh. So that was an early lesson, never say you're on your own, just fade out.

So I knew that there was great contra dancing and more dancing and music in New England, having visited and that was a big reason that I ended up in New Haven, Connecticut for graduate school. New Haven had a good music and dance community, but it was pretty small, so there were a lot of opportunities to get involved. I joined the Morris team. I met all the musicians, I started going to contra dances and also as soon as I could, I drove up to visit some friends in Western Mass because I had just had the feeling that there was so much exciting stuff going on there. This was Jeff Rogers, who's one of the Juggler Meadow Morris men still. I remember being so excited to go up there and they said, okay, we're going to go to the contra dance and we piled into an old Volvo and went tearing through the dark, through these dark, twisty roads. I was like, ohhhhh, we arrived at the Greenfield dance, which was the early days of David Kaynor's great dance. There weren't a whole lot of people there, but they said, "We go in through the window." I'm like up the outside of the Grange and went into the window and it's like, this is exciting, this is cool, these people are outlaws. So, living in New Haven, I always went up as much as I

could to partake of that exciting scene. Cammy Kaynor was doing the Northfield dance. Oh, and friends on the New Haven team took me to NEFFA, which was also just so exciting to see all the dancing.

In New Haven four times a year they had what they called a "Come all ye," which meant anybody could get up and call. At the time I had been dancing a lot of contras, I played fiddle tunes, I was teaching Morris, I was hearing callers, so it seemed very straightforward and easy to me to call a dance. I think, on the surface of it, that that's kind of true, that if you have a musical sense and the dancers know what they're doing, you can do a walk through by naming the figures, and you can call the figures at the end of the phrase and it's really not that difficult. Of the multiple skills that a caller needs, everybody has some that come naturally and some that don't that they have to work on. I've certainly met people who don't have that musical sense and it's a big challenge to call with the phrase, but that was easy for me. Things that came more slowly for me were the kind of public persona, stage presence, emcee, make it fun for everybody, build a community. That came around more slowly for me.

So it was easy, and 40 years later, I still have plenty to work on. I didn't have strong local role models, but there were always people coming through and calling. And so I got to hear a lot of people, but mostly I just paid attention and tried things. In the summer in New Haven the dances are at the Eli Whitney Barn. Eli Whitney, who we all know is the inventor of the cotton gin, his barn is still there, and it turns out he made no money on the cotton gin. He made all his money making guns for the Revolutionary War. Anyway, things were more low key for those dances. So, my friend Bill Fisher booked the callers and I said, do you think maybe I could call a whole dance? And so he let me call a whole dance and that was kind of the beginning of that. I was playing concertina and melodeon for contra dances, both of which are kind of not the easiest instruments to play for a dance. I could see that the fiddle was really the melody instrument. I told my sister Carol, I think I might learn how to play the fiddle. And she says, "Yeah, I've felt like that. I usually lie down until it goes away." So I started in on the fiddle and I went to Ashokan Northern Week, and I went to Pinewoods, and those were both so exciting to be in this community of people who liked playing and singing and dancing together. You know, that period of time for me was dance every dance, play every tune, sing every song. I just couldn't get enough of it. I would go up to Greenfield as much as I could with my friend Malcolm, who you know. There would be people from Vermont, people from New Hampshire, from Albany, from Boston, from Connecticut, everywhere converging on this dance and so it was just crazy with energy.

I remember pulling up after the two hour drive and walking in and hearing the music, because David Kaynor had such great bands and just couldn't wait to get in there. One great thing about that dance, which I wish more dances would emulate, is David always had a bunch of chairs on the stage in the back, and he invited dancers to come up and sit on the stage and be in the middle of the music and also musicians and many, many musicians got into playing for dances by sitting in the back with with David. I just admire so much what he did in his humble way for building community. So I would come back to graduate school after being up there for a weekend and I'd think, I have to quit graduate school and move to the woods and play the fiddle. I finally had to make a rule that I wasn't allowed to think about quitting grad school on a Monday, I had to wait till at least Tuesday and that was usually enough.

I eventually did finish and I then did move to Montague, MA for a year and lived in the woods and played my fiddle and did a lot of dancing. But we all have to work so I moved to Boston. And, you know, such a big scene in Boston and such a different scene. I guess I

left out something, which is that Malcolm [Sanders] and I and some of our friends made this band called Froggie on the Carport, which is the name of a fiddle tune that we learned from Ruthie Dornfeld at Ashokan. I was the caller for that band, and we toured around the southern Connecticut dances and went to New Jersey and went to Maine and because I could call I started collecting dances and I just kind of did it because it was there. I didn't have a big ambition to be a caller. It was just part of all of the things that you do and that's a message to people that really everybody can get in and do that. Here in Philadelphia, most of our dances are multi-caller evenings, which kind of lowers the bar for people to step up and do it.

So Boston, very different feel of the scene, but so many good callers and musicians and Larry Jennings kind of took an interest in me. We corresponded by letters. I was looking at my file of Larry Jennings letters the other day, and they were about caller feedback and how many dances do you do in an evening? He would listen carefully to every caller and give detailed, sometimes pointed feedback and not everybody liked that. I remember Steve Zakon-Anderson saying, when I call at the VFW, I dot all the I's and cross the tees, but to me, what that communicated was, strive for perfection. There are a lot of things that you can do as a caller or not do, Larry wanted you to do all of them. When I give callers workshops I kind of tell people both sides. Like, you know, this sounds pretty detailed, but we should strive to do as well as we possibly can and know that there's a lot of slack out there, folks. You know, you can actually go up there without a whole lot of preparation and do an okay job, and people will have a good time and it's fine. But let's strive to make it really fantastic and know that we have that slack to fall back on so that we don't have to really get stressed and worried that it's terrible to make a mistake. So that was something I learned from Larry.

I was in the rotation at the VFW and later the Scout House, actually. So the Scout House dance was on Monday nights with Yankee Ingenuity and Tony Parkes called that for years and then at some point it changed to being not Tony. I gather that Tony was hurt by that, and he's now facing some real serious health challenges.

**Mary** He is. We're thinking of Tony.

**Rick** So I was actually the first person to call one of those dances just because I happened to be free that night. I don't think that was anything particular about me. But the Scout House is kind of long; it's sort of a typical shape, rectangular shape. Tony always called the first dance of the second half, he would always call a chestnut, and he would line the sets up crosswise so that nobody had to be inactive for too long and I thought that was cool. And so for this first non Tony dance, I did the same thing. Hull's Victory, we know that dance, Hull's Victory commemorates a naval victory and it's the Constitution versus the Guerriere, which maybe we learned about in history class. But it turns out that right before that week, there was an article in the Boston Globe that the USS Constitution, which since that time has been moored at the pier there in Charlestown was going to be taken out to sea for the first time. So Admiral Hull was aboard the Constitution when it defeated the Guerriere and Hull's Victory the dance commemorates that naval battle. So I figured I had to call Hull's Victory as the first dance of the second half, like Tony did, a chestnut.

I lined the people up crosswise, and I said, who knows what dance I'm going to call and one person raised their hand, Ernie Spence, well known, no longer with us, dancer, but had the pieces fit together. The dance could as well be called The Hull's Victory because the Constitution was Old Ironsides and it was built with this southern live oak where the bends were used for natural joinery and that's what made the hull so strong that the

cannonballs bounced off. So anyway, we don't do Hull's Victory much anymore, but that was kind of a cool moment. So I was also playing fiddle for a lot of dances at that time and really played as many dances as I called. I ran an open band for an open mic dance that Larry Jennings put together and played with a bunch of people. But I was also a programmer, and I got a bad repetitive strain injury from too much typing and too much fiddling, which knocked me out of fiddling for ten years.

So, you know, music has always been such a huge pull for me so that was a big blow. But the silver lining was that I got more into calling and singing and the things that I could do. So I was driving to call in Greenfield and Rehoboth and Maine and and I was friends with musicians like Becky Tracy has always been a good friend of mine because she used to live in southern Connecticut. Nightingale, do you remember Nightingale?

**Mary** Oh, yeah.

**Rick** Nightingale was just so fantastic and innovative and powerful, great band and they were friends of mine and they suggested to a dance weekend organizer that they hire me for a dance weekend. So, you know, there's plenty of good callers out there. I think a lot of people wondered, how do I get hired for a dance weekend? Well, one answer is be friends with a good band. But I guess I did fine and well enough. So I kind of got into the dance weekend circuit that way. In terms of writing dances, which is, you know, I'm kind of known for. I had written a few dances, I don't even remember how I got them to people, but Kathy Anderson, she started calling my dances everywhere, and they got spread around and George Marshall started calling my dances.

And then, at one point, I was invited to be the program director of English and American Week at Pinewoods, my reaction being, don't they usually get a grown up to do this job?

**Mary** Surprise!

**Rick** I loved that, and I feel so proud of the three years that I did that. And sadly, there is no more English and American [Week] at Pinewoods although there are similar things, different places. My goal there was to attract young people and to hire young people and that was a bit of a change at that time and I think I was the first person to hire Anna Patton for a weekend, and Owen Morrison, they both came to my weeks. There's no question that they were fantastic people for that.

I used to go up to Maine, which just has fantastic energy and John and Toki Oshima, who did the North Whitefield dance with Ted Sannella, I would hang out with them. I have to say, my favorite part of touring, besides the calling, etc., is that you get to hang out with great people and you wake up in the morning, you have breakfast and you talk about stuff, you go for a walk, you play music, whatever. What a lovely thing to have friends all over New England from that experience.

Anyway, John loves playing Beatles songs and I got the idea, what if you did a Beatles contra dance? I had a lot of spare time being single for many years, and I went through every single Beatles song and picked out the ones that had roughly the right tempo, and roughly the right structure. The next time I was up there with John, I ran the idea by him and he got excited about it. So we made this whole program of Beatles songs melding into contra dances which we did up at North Whitefield. I've since done it a little more, and actually I'm doing it at NEFFA, where I'm playing the music with my wife Chloe and my son

Evan and our friend Cecelia. So Beatles contra at NEFFA, Saturday, well, by the time this comes out, it will have already happened.

**Mary** Probably will.

**Rick** I hope you liked it, everybody that was maybe there. So I met Chloe and I could say a lot about that, but she is just the best. I moved to Philadelphia and when you live in New England you never leave New England, because why would you? I spent my time in New England just loving every part of New England. Philadelphia was not really on my radar and so now I've been in Philly for 15 years, and it's actually a fantastic place. It turns out my New England friends don't visit that often, because why would you ever leave New England? But, you know, it's the best neighborhood I've ever lived in. I can walk...from my house, walk in the woods for two hours. I can walk to restaurants that are five minutes away, I can jump on the train and go downtown. I can walk to the dentist, I can walk to the contra dance. So if people come through and want to play the contra dance, come stay with us. We're nice and close.

**Mary** There you go. There's a reason to leave New England New Englanders. Go to see Rick and Chloe.

**Rick** That's right, and hang out with us in the morning and go for a walk and play tunes . Yeah, so, Philly you know, this has been a different time for me because I have this son, Evan, who's now 13 and so I didn't tour really much when he was little and then the pandemic came along. But Philly has a strong, strong music and dance community. We have a lot of callers and a lot of bands and focus on developing local talent. Jenny Beer just started a second contra dance, wanting to mentor young musicians and callers and I'm part of that, working with these young callers and also leading an open band. One curious thing, well, Philadelphia has always had a strong open band called SPUDS and everybody who plays music pretty much starts by reading music and so it's always a hurdle for people to switch from reading off the page to playing by ear which is the norm for our kind of music. But in Philly, a lot of people never really made that jump, I think partly because people don't necessarily get out into the wider world that much and if there's nothing pushing you to not have music in front of you, then it doesn't really happen.

SPUDS is great, has 20 or 30 people playing every couple of months for a dance, but it's mostly people reading music. So I wanted to have an open band that would be an opportunity for people to experience the joys of getting off the page. So I actually made a website and recorded all the tunes, and you can listen to them and loop them and slow them down. We don't have 30 people, but we have 12 people or something, and people are making that jump. I was totally inspired by David Kaynor for that. You know, that had a really strong rocking band and let anybody come along and play. And so I'm excited about that part of the world of Philly. It's a really warm, welcoming dance community. Nobody ever books ahead, there is no center set syndrome, we had an influx of young dancers after the pandemic and like I mentioned most dances have multiple callers, which definitely has its pluses and minuses but is a rare model and not many...people are proud of it and like continuing it.

There's a coordinating caller for every dance who solicits dances from anybody who might like to call, makes a program. So my focus has been much more local. So in addition to the regular contra dance Chloe and I run the Mount Airy Barn Dance, which is a family dance, community dance. That's been really nice for me. I have tended to be focused on the exciting part of the scene and the really cool choreography and calling for people who

know what they're doing so you can do fantastic stuff and that's still exciting and great. You know, any time you call, what you're trying to do is call fantastic dances that are right for this particular crowd, you know? So calling for a family dance is a completely different repertoire. But others on your show have talked about just the joy of calling for people who are experiencing this for the first time. People just have so much excitement and joy from experiencing this. I have to say if I had to say my philosophy of calling it's that what we offer is really important and it's really rare in the world. It's an opportunity for people to come together and move and smile and connect and laugh and experience joy. That just doesn't exist in people's lives, you know? There just aren't situations where you can interact with other people in a fun and safe way and actually touch them, you know, that doesn't exist in people's lives. And so being able to create that for people is a real gift to the world. It can feel like, oh, we're just in this little niche and we do this fun thing with ourselves.

But, more and more I'm interested in how we can give that experience to more people? The barn dance is a typical family dance and one day, this 13 year old, who had been a regular, came up to me and said I want to do harder dances with people my own age. I said, okay, well if you get them, I'll call for them. Teenagers often don't fit comfortably in any of our established dances. They feel a little too old when there's a lot of little kids, but they feel kind of out of place when there's a bunch of much older grown ups dancing and so a lot of times teenagers sort of drop out and disappear. But dancing is fantastic for teenagers and for young adults, too. I think there's a real opportunity for people everywhere to kind of bring teenagers into the world of dance, which I discovered by running this dance for four years, which we did. It was interesting in all kinds of ways. But I've got to say, it was my favorite dance to call. The teens were enthusiastic. They were capable, like at a family dance you can't call a lot of dances with arches because the people are too short, and maybe there are some seniors there and so if you call dances with a lot of galloping, they get tired. Well, you know, the teens are all tall enough, they can arch all night and they can gallop around all day. So that was fun in that way but they are also capable and able to do some easy contras.

So that was kind of the sweet spot was more interesting barn dances and easy, easy contras and it was also fascinating. Contra dancing has evolved so that there's tons of swinging. Contra dancers love swinging. It's an intimate thing, it's fun to go around and around, but those teenagers did not care about swinging. They didn't care if a dance had two swings or one swing or zero swings, you know? If a dance had one swing, it was kind of better for it to be a neighbor swing than a partner swing. Swinging is an intimate thing and the teenagers didn't really need that. I wanted to get them into the joy of contra dancing but you know how many dances are in your box that have no partner swing or no swing at all? Now you know, luckily, there's Chris Page's site, 25 hats off to Chris and his partner Michael Dyck for making the Callers Box, which is just a fantastic research [project] and such a huge amount of work.

But anyway, you can search for a duple improper dance without a swing or without a partner swing. Found some good dances in there and also we're in the middle of this role transition, role term transition and plus I had mostly girls so I didn't want to be calling gents and ladies. I had discovered through the barn dance that dances with no roles at all are just so fantastic. You know, people line up wherever they want, they stand wherever they want, you just don't even think about it. And it doesn't raise the question of what do you call the different roles if there aren't any roles? You know, that cuts out some things that might otherwise be fun but there are plenty of dances that are really fun. I mean, a lot of

people know Family Contra, which is a dance that just has balancing the ring and do si do and stuff like that.

**Mary** Sherry Nevins, thank you.

**Rick** Thank you, what a useful dance. So I started writing, trying to collect and write some other no role contra dances and it cuts out a lot of stuff, but there's a lot of stuff left. So I think I have five good ones and a few more ready to try out, because my son Evan is 13 this summer. It got killed by the pandemic, the teen dance, but we're going to start it up again in the fall. Another interesting thing about it is that it turns out virtually no teenager thinks that this sounds like something they would enjoy. So, you know, we had a committee with 4 or 5 teens and me and one of their moms and they would try to get their friends to come and they would fail. There are cultures where dancing is in the DNA and ours is not one of them. I've really thought about that for when we start this up again and I'm just wondering if coaching them to say you know when you say that it doesn't sound like fun or you're hesitant, you know, pretty much everybody has that reaction. If you will take a risk and come I personally guarantee that you will have a good time because when people actually come, they actually have a good time. Because the first couple of years we only had like maybe a square in her living room. But then it slowly started growing and people came back and people would come, would be able to talk a friend in into coming. So by the end we were getting in the 20s, which, for a regular contra dance would be like, oh man, that's like nothing. But it was so great, it felt like an exciting group and plenty of people to dance and the teens were just happy to be together and happy to try anything and we'd have snacks and they'd all sit in groups on the floor and talk.

**Mary** How often did you do them?

**Rick** Once a month from 7:30 to 9:30, it was a Friday night. So I'm excited to start that up again and I encourage anybody that might be hearing this to consider starting up a dance like that.

[ *Rick calls his own dance, Rick's Triplet #1 at the 2011 Chattahoochee Country Dancers Au Contraire November Dance Festival in Atlanta, GA to the music of Crowfoot (Adam Broome, Jaige Trudel, and Nicholas Williams) ]*

**Rick** And I've got to say it has me thinking a lot about the difference between an all comers dance and our regular contra dances. So dances like the barn dance or the teen dance where you really don't expect a lot of skill. I don't know if you've heard, but there are some really big square dances in the Mid-Atlantic, like in D.C. I think it's restarted since the pandemic, Janine Smith told me before the pandemic, they routinely got 400 people at their square dance and, you know, those were not skilled dancers. Those were people who loved the music and the community and moving around, and there was not a big barrier to coming and having a great time.

At our contra dances, we do pay a lot of attention to being open to everybody. We welcome the beginners and we really try to get them engaged and help them succeed but we lament that so few of them come back and pretty much everybody, it seems to me, has that experience. And why is that? Well, actually, you have to build some skills to really enjoy contra dancing and the swing is pretty intimate and it is not for everybody. There's a small fraction for whom it's just the thing, and they come back and they're delighted to learn the skills and really excited to do the swing. But, if you have an all comers dance that doesn't have that skill learning curve to climb and that doesn't force you into a lot of



intimate swings those people are just going to come and have a great time and come back. I think that's why those square dances have such big crowds. . I think that it's a possible growth opportunity for CDSS to put some focus and attention on these public all comers dances.

I think one thing that has driven these is the old time music scene. I just called the West Philly Square Dance, which also has restarted since the pandemic. There was an old time band from Baltimore and they said they have a square dance, it gets like 200 people, and Philly has a bunch of old time jams, and a lot of young people are playing that music and have a lot of friends and so the word gets around and people come to the square dance and have a fantastic time. And, you know, CDSS doesn't have a lot of connections with the old time music scene. I mean, there is some...and there are parts of the country where dances have mostly old time music, but it just seems like an opportunity to build connections with some new worlds and take this joy of dancing more to people who aren't interested in building skills. It doesn't have to be just squares, like when I called the West Philly Square Dance, I called only half squares and I called a couple longways dances. I called Pigs and Wolves. I don't know if you know that dance, but it's mostly done at family dances and it's totally, everybody loves it. It's kind of like Sasha in terms of how much people love it once they actually do it. All these young adults did it and had a fantastic time. I think you could call some of these no role contras there. There are some pluses to longways sets versus squares like, they're more space efficient, there's less sitting out. You might have one sitting out if there's an odd number of people, but you don't have those five people looking for a square and having to sit out.

**Mary** It's a great thought. I often tell people at a beginners workshop for a contra dance, I say, this kind of dancing is designed to be really easy to pick up and part of that is because you have a caller who's going to teach you everything you need to know, which is true. But we also need the caller because there's a lot that you have to learn to do it like you're saying. So I love kind of flipping it and I know we've all had those experiences where you do become really good at contra dancing and you get to this place of wild abandon where you're just kind of carried away by the music and there's nothing to say that you can't start with the wild abandon and just some really simple figures and great music and people.

**Rick** Yes, and if there's a regular dance that's attracting people and there's flyers out for the other dances 3% of those people are going to want more and kind of move over to join the other camp or other communities as well.

**Mary** Well, you've charted so many different courses through this world. It's really cool to hear the trajectory. And always good to hear, you never know how it's going to go when somebody says, I did square dancing in middle school. But luckily for you, it wasn't a detriment. Sometimes people who get really drawn into the music, they just want to stay in the music. But it sounds like you've been always kind of interested in all the different sides of this, both supporting the community aspect and making ways for people to access and join in the fun. I love that Larry Jennings gave you this perspective of you can also work towards perfection. You know, we never have perfection and so with calling, what are some of the things that you work towards when, when you're doing your very best and now when you're teaching people how to strive towards kind of creating the best caller experience, what are some of the things that you're thinking about?

**Rick** I guess my overall philosophy is to make everything as good as you possibly can for the dancers. Like that's what really motivated me from the beginning, is, you know, I would hear people who talked too much or didn't explain something clearly or could have picked

dances that would be more fun for the crowd and thinking this could be so much better. Take the time to make programs that really shine, when you're making your program, ask yourself what dance would be absolutely the best right here? We want people to say after every single dance, wow, that was a great dance. There's so many millions of ways to put together a program, and maybe you don't know what your crowd is, so you have to wing it but if you know your crowd maybe you can just really hone in and have people have that fantastic experience and the same with collecting dances.

I would say my philosophy of collecting dances and of writing dances, both rely on the same thing, which is, any dance can have pluses and minuses. People might have different opinions on what's the pluses and minuses, and for different crowds different things might be a plus and minus. But you know what are some obvious pluses, well that the transitions are smooth. What's a minus? You have to stop and change direction. You know, the timing really fits the phrase is a plus. A minus is oh, there's too much time for this or there's not enough time for that. Another minus, one of my minuses is a dance where you swing your partner and then you never see them again. You don't really kind of interact with them in other ways. Once I had that awareness, I was like, oh yeah, that's right and maybe it's okay to have a dance or two like that at night. But, you know, if you and I, that was our only dance that night, it might be like hey...

So, I encourage people to make a list of what are your real pluses in a dance and your real minuses in a dance, and then take a look at your dances and really evaluate them ruthlessly. Dances that have minuses don't really spread, the ones that spread are the ones that really are mostly pluses. When I'm writing dances or when I'm talking to people about writing dances, first of all, if you're just starting out writing a dance, it's really fantastic if you can make a dance that actually fits the phrases and progresses like you should, to feel proud of that and enjoy it. When you're going on to the next level you come up with something and you're really excited about it, oh my gosh, look what I did. You've got to kind of take the long view and ruthlessly evaluate it for minuses. So you look at your dance and you say, oh, actually this transition might be kind of awkward. Oh, you know, this dance is completely clockwise for the Robins. Or, you know, this dance is so full of cool figures that it's just too busy or gosh this kind of has the exact same predictable sequence as lots of other dances, or whatever it is. You have to develop the capability to see those things in your amazing creation that you just came up with. But take the good parts and rework it in many, many different ways, and keep at it until you see something that really doesn't have those minuses, and then try it out.

Either have some friends over and kind of walk it through—regular contra dancers—or if you're a caller kind of give it a try and see how it goes. I've had plenty of things that passed that first revision stage that I then tried out that I didn't notice, but that is kind of awkward, that swing is actually 14 beats maybe, that's a little too long. And so then you go back and you work it out in some different way as well. What if it were like this, what if it were like that? A lot of my dances that have turned out to be really popular were the fifth version of that idea. So you've got to kind of take the long view and be persistent. Keep a bunch of ideas going and when you're trying to work out some idea you might come up with some other idea. Oh, what about that? Well, there's another idea.

Another way of getting ideas is, how many times have you been dancing and thinking, oh, this is cool. This is a cool thing. I like this move, I never really saw that before oh, but this other part of this dance is kind of awkward. So that's a golden opportunity to go write a dance, take that good idea and put it together in some different ways that don't have that. This is not exactly the same thing, but my dance, Leave the Wine—Kathy Anderson wrote

a nice square dance called Weave the Line. But she wrote it in the days when having just a partner swing and not a neighbor swing was very common. And these days there are plenty of fantastic dances like that, but most people don't like to call them and so they just sit around at the back of the box. I took that idea and put a second swing in it. I worked it out carefully so that it was also a really nice dance and so that one, well, that one took off. So seeing an idea that can be improved is a great, great way to go that way.

I have a workshop that I love to do, called Rhythm and Timing for Dance Callers, where we talk about being the vocalist in the band and, well, there's two parts of it. There's being a vocalist in the band and there's also what exact words are you going to say at what moment and how do you choose them. And, you know, for some things it's obvious, you count to four and say "Two robins chain across". But for other things, you really have to analyze, when do people need to hear what word comes where? For example, if you're going to do an allemande, well...what are you doing? An allemande. Who are you doing it with? A person...you know, your neighbor, your shadow, your partner, the other person of the same role, which hand are you using? How much are you going to do it? That's like four pieces of information. Well, you could say, three quarters, robins left allemande. But you wouldn't say that, you know...so you have to decide what information is most important to get across to people first. I have a way of analyzing that I show to people but then I also say you can really analyze this deeply and make it perfect or you can also wing it and that's fine too. Then of course, there's walkthroughs. One thing I tell people that I think is kind of a surprise to most is plan the specific words you are going to say and practice saying them out loud. I think that does not come naturally to most callers. Like, let's take "pass through to a wave," if we're going to get into the geeking out part of the calling experience.

**Mary** Oh yeah, I'm ready.

**Rick** So how many times have you seen somebody do a walkthrough that has a pass through to a wave and they say, okay, pass through to a wave, robin's catch left hand. But they've already passed each other and they're on the other side, looking around, going, what do I do now? You know? So what is the set of words that we can craft that will still be concise? My favorite comment from Bruce Hamilton: "Ration syllables."

**Mary** I love that.

**Rick** That'll be concise and get things across. So you have to tell them something before they start moving. I used to say, "Don't do it yet, but...da da da..." But I've learned it's always good to accentuate the positive rather than negative and so "When I say go, da da da". English callers do that, like Joanna Reiner. "When I say 'go' we're going to pass through to a wave. Robins, you'll catch left hands and then take right with your partner on the other side. Okay, everybody pass by the right shoulder, robins catch left." You know, so if you don't think about that in the moment, you're going to say, pass through to a wave first and you're going to lose this moment. So you have to actually think about it. And then it's one thing to think about it, but it's just going to go so much better if you actually use your voice and your tongue and get those words to be comfortable, because we can all say "Two robins chain across" because we've said it a million times, but for a novel thing we haven't, and we might trip up. And once again, there's lots of slack and you can back up and nobody will even really think twice about it but we want to strive to get it right the first time.

**Mary** I love that and and I'm curious just to take it a step further, because this is something I think about, once you practice the words and then you're on stage and you have a hall full of dancers, you know, because part of what you're describing there is connected to timing in a different way. When do people receive the words and then when do they start moving? How are you directing people who are moving through space? You can say the words, but then you also, when you're at the mic, you need to be watching the hall full of people, seeing are my words reaching at the right time? Are they having the effect? So I'm curious if and how you experience kind of like a physical connection. How is that experience for you when you're at the mic and you're trying to navigate saying words that get people to move in a particular way and end up in a wave? I don't know if that's too abstract.

**Rick** I'm not sure I have a good answer for that.

**Mary** That's okay.

**Rick** Except that, it's definitely a skill to have part of your attention on what you're saying and part of your attention watching as much of the hall as you can. Because the feedback definitely comes back. You didn't notice that the bottom of the set totally was lost? So I guess for me it's just reminding myself to keep looking around and keep scanning and watching for those pockets of chaos.

**Mary** Right, right. It is a feedback loop and in some ways, I mean, sometimes more overtly than not, when you start to see the waving hands go up or the murmurs rise, but I'm just always curious the different ways that people experience that. I feel like I have a really physical...I just interviewed Cis Hinkle and she was talking about how she tells callers to move when you're kind of teaching and I think I relate to that. I think I feel a little bit somewhere in my body when I'm saying, you know, catch left hand or right to your neighbor. I'm just a little bit mimicking those movements in my body and whether or not...it might just be my imagination that is somehow getting conveyed through my words or how I'm saying it.

**Rick** Reminds me of what Lisa Greenleaf said when you interviewed her, was think like a dancer.

**Mary** Right? What do you need to hear to get where you need to go?

**Rick** Well, an idea I've had for years that I've never done anything about is, you know how over time, you learn how to teach a certain figure, and you learn that a certain set of words just really gets across, whereas others don't. I think we need a crowdsourced website where people can post those things and so everybody doesn't have to learn them for themselves.

**Mary** That's a great idea.

**Rick** You know how, when you try to teach a Rory O'More balance and spin? Some of the people do a half allemande, instead and end up facing the wrong way and completely clueless? Mary is nodding yes. I learned that if you say "Drop hands", most people say they get all the hands set and they say, balance to the right, balance to the left. Maybe they've thought about saying, okay, slide in front of the other person, but people will still turn by the right because you have this hand and so you're going to do it. But if you say "Drop hands and then da da da da..." So that's one tiny gift to the world of callers, say

“Drop hands when you're teaching that and maybe nobody actually needed to hear it but for those couple people... I'm sure you have a half dozen of those that you figured out that I haven't that would be great. Oh, one that I picked up somewhere, I don't know, is that if you're teaching how to hold an allemande and some people think you should loop the thumb, but I say, "the thumb is not a souvenir."

**Mary** I love that. That's amazing.

**Rick** Everybody laughs but they get the...you know. So anyway.

**Mary** Right, what you're saying is pay attention to your thumb.

**Rick** Yeah.

**Mary** Pay attention to the thumbs. Yeah yeah.

**Rick** So it would be great to collect those somewhere.

**Mary** Yeah I mean Rick, you don't seem very busy right now, so maybe you want to start that?

**Rick** Yeah.

**Mary** I feel like also a sort of linguist could have a heyday with that, too.

**Rick** And it would probably be different for different situations. But another one is when teaching a courtesy turn. The word "scoop" seems to be ...

**Mary** That's what I was thinking too.

**Rick** I have started calling it a "scoop turn" instead of a courtesy turn. Because a courtesy turn doesn't really convey anything until you know what it is. But if you call it a scoop turn, maybe a few people will get it a little more viscerally.

**Mary** That's great. Well, whoever out there wants to start this, Rick just gave you 3 or 4 things to start your collection.

**Rick** While we're geeking out, I'll tell you one more thing, which is you know all those Becket dances that start with circle left three quarters and swing your neighbor? And people say "Like many of these dances, this dance starts..." So I skip all that. I don't even put you in Becket formation, I just say circle left all the way around and swing your neighbor.

**Mary** I do that.

**Rick** Do you? All right Mary!

**Mary** And then at the end, I say, "Surprise, you're in Becket!"

**Rick** Yeah.

**Mary** So much more efficient.

**Rick** And one other thing, so when I'm teaching people, what do I say in walkthroughs? Always orient the dancers before you tell them to do anything. Always say which way you're facing because if people are different, they'll do something different. So that's, you know, a pretty common thing that a lot of people already know, but I have heard so many callers, you know, now we're in this world where we're trying to navigate this new world of larks and robins, which in many ways is pretty easy. You just say larks where you always said gents and you say robins, where you always said ladies. But in other ways it's a little tricky, like making sure everybody's in the right place at the beginning of the dance. I've heard many callers say, "Take your hands in circles of four. Now the lark is on the left and the robin is on the right." That is meaningless unless you know which way you're facing, and people are facing all kinds of directions and people don't really notice that. So my little warm up at the beginning of a dance is "Bow to your partner across the set. Bow to your neighbor up and down the set." One thing that's doing is it's giving people the term "across the set" and "up and down the set" just in an indirect way. "As you're facing your neighbor, larks are on the left, robins are on the right."

**Mary** So I feel like you're sort of reciting scripture or something. There's that familiar, you know, repeated words to me and words that I have said. In a beginner's lesson, I sometimes introduce it as contra dance orienteering, which I don't even know if that's a good metaphor. But it's like what's your sense of direction and what's the language that you need to reference it.

**Rick** Well I'm talking about the beginner lesson. I think there's so much to be said about that and that's something that I don't see being shared and discussed as much as, you know, the calling and the walkthrough. Somebody just posted a question on the Shared Weight callers list. How do you assign roles during the beginner lesson? I think that's a challenging question because on one hand a lot of people want to move to the world where there just are no roles and everybody dances every role, and so they want to not make any distinction with the newcomers. Let's have these new people, you know, jumpstart the new world. In our community, there's a lot of people who have been dancing a long time, and if you look at the set, there are more men dancing larks and more women dancing robins by a good margin, maybe 70 or 80%. It feels a little unfair to not tell the newcomers that. Here's something like, we want the newcomers to succeed and feel that they belong and that they're a part of things. Are we going to withhold this information from them?

A lot of people who answered on the dialog said, "No I don't tell them". Somebody said I teach them both roles. I teach them how to swing from both sides or how to chain. That's going to take somewhat longer. But that was interesting, so I can really see both sides. And also what came up is a lot of men, you know, swinging is intimate, and there are a lot of men who feel uncomfortable swinging other men and so they want to dance on the left where happens less now, you know, in the new world where it's 50/50, then those people might stop coming.

**Mary** Right.

**Rick** But, we're trying to be inclusive for everybody. Larks and robins is motivated by being more inclusive for people who are wanting to dance both roles or maybe are LGBTQ+. It's good to recognize that that change is also going to be uncomfortable for some other people. That also got discussed in another thread and people were saying, that's just homophobia and that's bad. And then people are saying, well, you know, when you grow

up as a man, this stuff comes at you all kinds of ways and the way it feels is just a product of how you grew up. So I don't really know, I think that's a tricky question and some people are strongly on one side or the other, but I think it's good to keep talking about it.

**Mary** It's definitely good to keep talking about it. There's so many different things to consider. I think it's interesting, the idea of the beginners lesson as a space to kind of present maybe sort of the ideal that you're striving for, which is for a lot of us right now anybody dances any role. The only difference in the role is kind of how you end the swing. And being able to describe two roles allows us to sort of teach a lot of different choreography and figures and that's often how I approach it. But then I think it's important what you're bringing up too, is you can teach all that to beginners, as this is how it works and then you're sending them into a community of people with a wide range of different experiences and norms.

I just saw this at a dance week I called at where I taught a beginners lesson and I kind of did what I just described. I taught two roles. I taught this is how you swing. I always suggest if people are brand new to pick one role to dance consistently for maybe the first half or the whole evening just to get used to that. And then when we started the dance I saw one person who, at least me not knowing them, presenting male and was dancing in the Robins role. It made me really happy to just sort of from my outsider view he was perfectly happy himself dancing in that role and was being received without question dancing as a Robin. And, you know, that's kind of the idea. Like, that's how we hope that goes and I know that it doesn't always, you know. So yeah, it's a lot of different things to consider. And like you said, it's great that we're having these conversations, we gotta keep doing that.

[ [Rick calls the dance Tica Tica Timing by Dean Snipes](#) at the 2015 Flurry Festival with music by the Great Bear Band, (Andrew VanNorstrand, Noah VanNorstrand, Kim Yerton, Rebecca Bosworth-Clemens, and Dana Billings) ]

**Mary** Well, we're covering lots of things. You talked a little bit about choreography, and I wanted to make sure we hear about that fully, because that is certainly, your name's on a lot of my dance cards, which is always fun when it's a friend on there. One thing I was wondering is your career as a computer programmer and whether that lends itself to any aspects of dance choreography.

**Rick** I mean, I think they're definitely kind of related ways of thinking about things. To write good code you have to be very kind of precise and analytical and organized. I think that those skills definitely have a carryover. I mean, my wife will tell you that I have a lot of patience for kind of looking at all of the details to answer a question or solve a problem like what are you going to order from Amazon? And, you know, what's the best way for this idea to come out into contra dance? What hotel should we stay in when we're going to such and such a place? So I have a lot of patience for looking through a lot of things and thinking about them carefully. At one job a friend said, Rick looks into all the dark corners of the software, so to that extent, I think there's some carryover and for sure, a lot of dance choreographers are also analytical thinkers. But a lot aren't as well.

**Mary** I mean, it sounds like your first impulse to compose a dance set that was more connected to music and movement that you heard a tune, right?

**Rick** That's right.

**Mary** This tune makes me want to dance.

**Rick** Yeah. And in fact, I think one of my most popular dances was kind of an early one, Chuck the budgie.

**Mary** Oh, yeah.

**Rick** That came out of the same thing, out of this particular fiddle tune that had some balances in the B part, which is rarely played, actually, but it turned out to be a nice enough dance with an interesting hook that a lot of people liked doing it, having nothing to do with the... I also wonder about the title, you know, like so you know, the name of the tune was Pat the Budgie. Which you wonder—a budgie is a little bird, a parakeet—is that a particular budgie named Pat, or is that the act of patting some other budgie on the head? Mary is making a little patting motion with her hand. So that's where the title came from. They have that same play and to what extent does a dance with a cool title get passed around a little more?

**Mary** That's a great question because certainly for callers that sticks in your head and then I think some dances have become sort of iconic, Beneficial Tradition or I don't know what other names would come to mind, but then I feel like there's plenty of dancers who just maybe even if you are a caller who says the name of the dance and the choreographer. I always wondered, do dancers hear that or care? I'm someone who... I don't say a lot of extra stuff at the mic. I'm not a big personality, but sometimes I love just getting to say something about the dance titles. That offers me, like, a little piece of banter.

**Rick** Yes.

**Mary** And so I use it in that way. You don't want to get too much into choosing dances for their titles. It's like drinking wine for the label.

**Rick** I just saw a dance title. I can't remember, was it Maia McCormick? I don't know who wrote a dance called. "I Can't Believe it's Not Butter". "Butter" is the famous Gene Hubert dance and she wrote it slightly differently so that it's like it but a little bit different and that was a famous ad line for some margarine long ago.

**Mary** Absolutely.

**Rick** Oh, and Jim Kitch wrote a dance called "I Wish They All Could Be California Twirls".

**Mary** So fun. I mean, some of them are just fun to say.

**Rick** But, you know, I think if you ask, why have I been successful as a choreographer? I think that quality of being able to persist with something and really wait until... and try it in so many ways and wait until I think it's really good, you know, this idea that I have, because you can have a good idea that makes an okay dance. But a dance that goes viral, meaning, when somebody dances, they say, what is that? I want to write that down. I want to call that, I want to have that, you know. Those dances are ones that really. I mean, I don't know, sometimes those come in a flash, but for me, it's a lot of just being patient and reworking it.

You asked about my software skills. I had my dances on a website kind of early on and I was able to make a good website, and I think that might have helped get them around too.



Now everybody can just send them to Chris Page. So generous, so generous and putting everything up and looking at every YouTube video and figuring out what the dance is.

**Mary** That Chris Page tag on YouTube. It's a wonder. How do you contend with sort of the relatively finite vocabulary of contra dance moves and how many different ways can they be combined? Do you ever have the urge to expand the vocabulary or really push for something new or something fresh?

**Rick** Well, I think almost everybody who writes contra dances wants to make something that hasn't been made before. I'll say that that can be taking a common set of figures and just putting them together in a beautiful way like Dean Snipes has a dance called Tica Tica Timing that has petronellas in it, and it's just so beautiful. It's really simple but nobody had put it together that way before. There's a lot of different dances with Rory O'Mores in them but I don't think there's as clear of a winner somehow, anyway, that's one thing. So it is possible to have new moves into contra dancing, but they have to be things that can be easily taught and learned by people in one walkthrough. You know, like the ones that are going to persist need to have that quality. And like poussettes came in, I think kind of for that reason, is that it's really pretty obvious how to do it. It's not totally the easiest thing, but, you know, push offs tried to come in, but I don't think they've really stuck very strongly because they're a little harder to do.

**Mary** Like a ricochet?

**Rick** Yeah, ricochet. There are areas that have not been as fully explored as others. One of them that I've been messing with lately is cloverleaf. Everybody has their hands crossed in a circle. There are interesting things that can be done with that. If you do a roll away from that position, you don't need to change hands, like it just unwinds. I haven't quite figured out a dance that totally nails that but it's coming.

**Mary** That's exciting preview, folks. You heard it here first.

**Rick** I've had that question for 25 years. How is it possible to have more new, interesting contra dances? It can't be possible. But yet then you do one and it's like, oh, yeah, I never thought of that. So I guess we'll know when it just stops happening, or when every new dance is like, no.

**Mary** Right, or when we go the route of modern Western Square and start having designations of classes that you have to take to keep up with all the...

**Rick** But, some of the things that weren't always common in contra dances like Petronella twirls are actually quite easy for beginners to learn. So one of those no role contra dances that I was talking about has Petronellas and the teens loved it, and they could do it easily. So it's not just forward and back and do si do and allemandes that are so straightforward that anybody can do them, some of the newer things.

**Mary** Yeah, well, I look forward to more dances to come and I love that you're expanding into the realm of family dance and teen dance.

**Rick** I would love for all of those great choreographic minds out there to turn their attention to contra dances that have no roles, which means no swing, it means no chain. There's a lot of things that are trickier. But, you know from calling one night stands that you only need 12 dances. If you have 6 or 7 no role contras that everybody can do instead of just

one family contra then how great would that be? So I made a few. Anybody else make some? Please send them to me.

**Mary** All right, me too. I love those kind of dances. What else? Anything big that we're missing? I have some closing questions that you probably know.

**Rick** You have asked people who were their big influences in the contra world. I didn't say much about that, but I mentioned Larry Jennings, mentioned David Kaynor. George Marshall, what a great taste in dances like when you go to a George Marshall dance, every dance is going to be really good and enjoyable. So that was inspiring to me and his just smooth stage presence. That stage presence is something that came slowly for me, and I just admire people who have it innately, like George and Steve Zakon-Anderson and Lisa Greenleaf. What I tell callers is that it's pretty rare to have that starting out, and it's just fine to stick to the basics, you know, to teach well and call clearly. And as you're up in front of the mic, time after time after time, you'll get more relaxed and your personality will come out. For me, that took a long time. But at this point, I do feel really comfortable and confident being the person bringing the fun.

Like at that West Philly square dance was one time when everything was just going great and everybody had a fantastic time. It's great when the caller can bring some personality to it, but it doesn't always come out easily.

Kathy Anderson was the first person that really called grid squares, which we didn't talk about too much and not many people do them. It's difficult to have good ones that really come across. That's been exciting for me. Ralph Sweet, I was able to take a singing square class from him the one year that I lived in Montague. Carol Ormand; I haven't had too many calling buddies, which is sort of sad but Carol Ormand for a while was a good one.

One thing I learned from her was, you have a picture in your head of how you want people to do something. Like it's just going to be, why are they doing it this way when they could do it this other way? And she said, the way to tell people that is try to motivate them to want to do it your way by saying "There's a really nice moment if..." or "It's especially good connection if," and that still allows them to choose how they're going to do it. But they might go oh yeah, I want to try that.

Another thing that Bruce Hamilton said, besides "Ration syllables", is even if you're nervous, be in charge. Like, whenever we're nervous we want to be kind of apologetic and let people know that we're nervous. But no, no, the thing to do is to just step up and be in charge. That's what the dancers want. You can talk to your friends afterwards and say how nervous you were and apologize for all the mistakes you made.

Another thing that I like to encourage people to do is be the vocalist in the band. You know, being comfortable with music, that kind of comes easily to me. Square dance callers do that much more than contra callers because we mostly like to get out of the way and have people dancing to music. But for the time that you're calling, instead of saying, down the center four in line, turn as a couple, come on back. I mean, that's an exaggeration, but you can say [speaking rhythmically] "Go down the center four line, turn as a couple and come on back." You can syncopate, you can use your vocal inflection. For a moment you're the vocalist in the band. Sometimes I like to sort of rap, like, just string together a whole collection of syllables without stopping and then get out of the way later.

**Mary** That's your moment, that's your moment to shine. One thing that I just love hearing Lisa Greenleaf do is she's figured out how to deploy the "uh." Like, in square dance...I don't know how that's going to come across on this recording but it is just one of the most exciting things to me when she just punctuates rhythm in her calling, and it's often in a square, and it's so effective and so unexpected. I remember the first time I heard it, I was like, Lisa just went "UH" and it did something, you know? So great. I love all these connections, these little things that we learn from each other along the way and then gives you so many great memories. You've shared a lot of those.

**Rick** Yeah. So we've talked about that calling takes a whole lot of different skills, some of which come easily and some you have to work on. So I actually made a list and I also made a list of the skills required for a podcast. Because, as you know, I had a podcast for a year before the pandemic which I'm very proud of if anybody wants to listen to it, it's up there on my website.

**Mary** Oh, we'll link to it in our show notes for sure.

**Rick** Okay. That's a challenging and fun thing about podcasting is there are so many different parts that you can strive to do correctly. I thought about that list a lot before I put it up. I only thought about the caller one a little bit, but right now it's a 33 for podcasting and 31 for calling. I bet there's more to be thought about for the caller skills, but, maybe I can put that up somewhere too.

**Mary** Oh, definitely, yes. I put together some links and and things related to what we talk about in the episode so we can put that all in there for sure. Well, I don't want to wrap up, but we shall for now. I have three questions that I close with, and that allow us to talk a little bit more. So, the first is to do with how you keep and catalog your dances.

**Rick** I have a separate box for contras versus all comers dances. It's funny, I still use cards. I don't really have things online. I haven't lost my box, ever although I did leave it on a ferry one time and somehow it came back to me, if you can believe that, in Seattle.

**Mary** Lucky.

**Rick** I don't know if you've ever bought any index cards recently, but they're really, really thin and flimsy.

**Mary** I have noticed this. Yes, they don't make them like they used to.

**Rick** I looked online and it said extra thick index cards so I ordered some of those, but those are way too thick. I put out on my local "Buy Nothing" group, who has a bunch of index cards sitting around in the bottom drawer that they never use? A couple of my neighbors came up with them, and so I ran with those for a while and then I asked again, and I didn't get any. So I did one of those long Amazon analyses.

**Mary** With all your patience.

**Rick** Yes, and I actually found some that are pretty close to what the old ones were. So, I can share that link as well, they're a little bit thicker, but not so that you really notice.

**Mary** Well, that's very generous that you'd share that hard won knowledge.

**Rick** I put the date on the back of the card when I called it, and I know when I called everywhere so I can reconstruct when I need to know did I call this at this place? It's interesting to see I've called this dance 68 times or I've never called this dance before. Or, I called something tonight for the first time, what was it?

Most calls in a contra dance are kind of standard that are in many dances and they just roll off your tongue and then some things that are unique moves you have to really think about exactly what words am I going to say? So sometimes I write those out on the back of the card too, underlining the stressed syllables. Because if I went to all that trouble to figure it out, but I'm not going to call that dance again for a year and a half I can go, Oh, look at that. Thank you old Rick for having done that.

**Mary** Nice.

**Rick** I think the categories in my box are probably not that interesting. I also have a drawer of old dances that I don't call anymore, including, I think, over 100 dances that I wrote and thought they were good enough that I wrote them on a card, but then ended up thinking they weren't good enough. So that harkens back to what we talked about earlier. And, you know, other dances that I don't call anymore. Because I only have one box and there's a category of my main dances that I call. When I'm planning a dance, I like to page through every card and make three piles. I really want to call this, I might want to call this, I don't want to call this for whatever reason. A given dance might end up in any of those piles for a different dance. And then I can take that first pile and say, okay, can I put together a program with these dances I'm really excited about? Maybe there's too many and I ditch some or maybe I pull in some in the middle or whatever. I think that's harder with a database of a zillion dances, although maybe you put a tag on some of the dances that they're sort of your current ones, and then you could page through them that way. But I'm not sure how to duplicate that programming exercise if everything is online.

**Mary** Yeah, that's a big part of it for me too, so another one for team cards. I haven't done a tally of all my interviewees so far, but it's pretty mixed. When you're calling do you have any pre or post gig rituals?

**Rick** Well, if I'm driving a longer distance, which I don't do quite so much right now. But, I like to practice calling the harder dances while I'm driving, because I've discovered that it's about the same level of distraction. Driving provides about the same level of distraction as being up in front of a bunch of people and so if I practice calling it through a bunch of times to some good music in the car, then it's probably going to come out pretty well at the dance.

For some reason they never put out a chair for the caller. I mean every so often.

**Mary** This is true. I confirm, I feel like, I arrive, I go and look for a chair.

**Rick** I actually look for two chairs because there's never a table either so I have one facing me that I put all my stuff on.

**Mary** The things we suffer through.

**Rick** I know. Afterwards, you gotta get some food somewhere, which, you know, no place is open except the convenience store. They always have that freezer with the ice cream novelties in it, so that's pretty common. I remember Bill Olson telling me that he would eat

an entire pint of Ben & Jerry's while driving home, but I don't quite allow myself to do that. You know, if it's a longish drive, sometimes it's hard to stay awake, you try everything. Like, have you tried slapping yourself?

**Mary** Oh, yeah.

**Rick** It really hurts, but it doesn't do any good. I tried singing. I tried everything I could think of, the one thing that worked for me was playing the bones. You know, the bones that you kind of rattle. Put on some good music, play the bones. That got me through the last half hour many times.

**Mary** That's pretty good. I don't think I've ever done this myself, but, one I've heard is eating a small food item like Cheerios, where you just eat one at a time, very slowly. Maybe you won't fall asleep if you're chewing. And then in extreme cases, doing that with wasabi peas, that give you a little spicy rush. The other one I've heard, I live with a musician, and he and some of his musician friends have shared that if you listen to a recording of yourself playing, sort of for the cringe factor, that will just keep you going. That's kind of a worst case scenario.

**Rick** That's interesting because whoever really wants to listen to a recording of yourself calling. Like, it's probably a really good idea, like you could learn something but if it has the side benefit of keeping you awake while driving maybe just kind of roll the tape while you're...

**Mary** Exactly.

**Rick** Then, of course, there's giving up, pulling off, finding a nice, quiet street and taking a nap and only waking up to the flashlight of the policeman pointing in at you, that's happened to me a couple times.

**Mary** It has? Oh my goodness. Are you alive in there? Oh yes, I've just been calling a contra dance, have to rest up. Well, final question...

**Rick** Introvert, extrovert?

**Mary** If you know.

**Rick** My answer is it's a spectrum. I'm somewhere in that spectrum. But I heard a good way of figuring it out. Which is, what do you do to recharge? And to me self time is how I recharge. There are plenty of people where recharging means socializing. So I think if you want to pick your primary, that's a good question for it, and then for me it would be introvert.

**Mary** How does that play out when you're at the mic or when you're calling? Do you have to charge up before?

**Rick** No, because I really love doing it. I mean, there's certainly my extrovert side too. Also, calling is a surprisingly solitary activity, so that even though you're at the nexus of all this energy of the music and the dancers and making it all happen you're kind of alone up there. I guess that doesn't exactly get at introvert/ extrovert. I don't know, did Steve Zakon-Anderson say that he was more extroverted? I don't think he did, actually.

**Mary** I don't remember. I agree that that is a funny thing about calling actually. You only need one caller pretty much.

**Rick** I've been at dance weekends where I was friends with the band, and it was fantastic. Crowfoot were great friends of mine, and they stayed at my house in Boston a million times, and we did, I don't know, a dozen dance weekends together and I just love hanging around with them. And then, you know, you might be at a dance weekend where you don't know the band at all and they have this cozy gang, they have their buddies and they're doing their thing and you might not know them or know the organizers or any of the dancers, but just an opportunity for making more friends.

**Mary** That's right. Well, it's certainly one of the joys of doing this podcast is getting to talk to my caller friends, near and far. It's such a pleasure and thank you so much for making time to come on the show.

**Rick** Well, my pleasure, Mary. I totally remember meeting you and getting to know you at the beginning and thinking this is the kind of person I want in my dance community. You know, just with joy right out there and wanting to do everything and participating and connecting. Love that you're doing this, and I hope we'll get to hang out soon.

**Mary** Me too. Yes, please and you certainly were one of the people that called me into the dance community, for sure. So it's really nice to reconnect and next time off screen, hopefully.

**Rick** Sounds good.

**Mary** All right. Thanks, Rick.

**Rick** Thank you Mary.

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

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Happy dancing!

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