

Transcript - From the Mic Episode 23 - Cis Hinkle

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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.

Cis Intro

Mary Hello and happy spring From the Mic listeners! We're back with another caller conversation with you - this month we're going down south to Atlanta, Georgia to hear from Cis Hinkle.

Cis has delighted contra and square dancers since 1985 with her skilled teaching, welcoming manner, playful enthusiasm and masterful selection of dances. She is in great demand at music and dance festivals all over the U.S., England and Denmark. She's also the current president of Atlanta's Chattahoochee Contra Dancers. When not on the road, Cis teaches tai chi classes!

In our conversation Cis takes us back to the first time she stumbled into a contra dance in her native Atlanta, shares how she overcame stage fright and began calling all over the world, and brings us right up to her most recent pursuit, learning to call modern western squares. We had a hoot! Here's Cis.

Beginnings

Mary Cis Hinkle, welcome to From the Mic.

Cis Thank you so much Mary. It's great to be here.

Mary It's great to have you. Thanks for taking time after your exciting travels abroad, which I'd love to hear about. But now you're back on the home front. Where are you speaking to us from today?

Cis I am in my home in Atlanta, Georgia.

Mary Wonderful. And so I usually just kind of start from the beginning and try to get a sense of how you as a caller found your way to the mic. So would you kind of introduce a little bit of your background? Where did you find your way to traditional dancing? What was your way in and how did you start calling?

Cis Okay. Let's see, I stumbled into a dance. I actually had been living in upstate New York for a little bit, and moved back home to Atlanta in 1980 and happened to notice a flier somewhere that a band from Ithaca, where I had just moved from, was going to be playing

this thing called a contra dance. And it happened that it was in the neighborhood I was living in so I thought, well, heck, I'll go check this out. First person I saw when I walked in the door was my brother's best friend from high school—so that was handy. And sort of the rest is history. As far as dancing goes, that's what got me hooked back in 1980.

And I've been dancing with this group here in Atlanta, we call ourselves the Chattahoochee Contra Dancers. We used to be Chattahoochee Country Dancers, but we got a little more specific lately. In about 1985, as a group, we realized that we needed to grow some more callers and musicians, and so did our sort of...kind of sister group in Birmingham, Alabama. We all sort of grew up together. The folks that started each of them knew each other and were musicians and played together and stuff. So, we decided we would put on a weekend to train callers and bands, and we called it "Country Dance College." Back in the day, we used to have just as much fun planning events and activities as we did doing them. So we got together and we figured out a fight song and an alma mater. We gave each other student numbers like 3.14159, blah, blah, blah. So anyway, we had fun putting this thing together and at the time, the first person we knew who was a traveling caller was Sandy Bradley from Seattle.

She was like the only person we really had interacted with at that point I think, and she, being a musician and a caller, could handle both sets of training. So we asked her to come, and she was our professor emeritus, and she called our regular Friday night dance that weekend and then, taught..I forget the order, probably musicians in the morning and callers in the afternoon, or vice versa. During the callers portion, she had us do some great exercises that work, like calling along with her as we danced. And then she gave each of us in groups of 3 or 4 some words to read at the microphone. It was like, you know, "allemande left with your left hand, back to your partner..." you know, that kind of thing. I think, probably of the group up at the mic, I was probably the loudest because the plan for the weekend was that she would do workshops during the day and then Saturday night was a dance called and played by the students.

Mary Nice.

Cis So that's pretty quick jumping into calling a dance the first night. But, she asked for volunteers, and she turned to me and said, "And you're going to call, here call this," and she handed me a card. And she put me on last. She played with the band, there were different little subsets of people playing and she played with the band I called with. So I kind of figure it was a setup, it's entirely her fault that I'm doing what I'm doing today. So that's how I got started. And then, you know, after that we were just sort of in our local group, call 1 or 2 in somebody else's program and then split an evening as one does when you're starting off. And so, it just sort of developed from there. That was back in '85.

Mary Nice. It does sound like Sandy was on a mission.

Cis Indeed.

Mary And so take me from New York to the Chattahoochee Dancers, that's in Atlanta?

Cis Yeah. I grew up in Atlanta, went off to college in Michigan. When I graduated, I was kind of in the hippie mode, so I thought before I ran off to California where everybody else was, I would go visit a friend in upstate New York. And I kind of never got away from there, so I was there for a few years. And actually once in Ithaca, I stumbled into a contra dance, but I was one of those beginners that just laughed and stumbled the whole time and didn't do it again. But, once I got down here, back home is where I started really

discovering what dancing was all about. And back then we used to do contras and squares and English and, you know, a whole big mix. Unfortunately, not so much anymore. But, that's what it used to be like.

Mary Yeah, I'd love to hear more about those early days in Atlanta. So you're saying it was kind of maybe a broader umbrella of country dancing?

Cis Yeah. The people that were teaching and calling, they were the ones who were sort of setting the agenda. A few of them had gone to Pinewoods before, and some of them were, I don't even know where they learned to call or teach. But so we had, like I said, we had much more variety than is common these days. You know, we'd do a contra dance, then we'd do a square, then we might do a three-face-three. You know, all the kind of interesting variety that is out there, but it's not as often made use of these days. And then gradually our group sort of evolved into more and more contras and fewer and fewer other things. There was an English dance group that started up, and now we have sort of separate groups that it's a lot of overlap of people, but it's run differently. So an English group and a contra group with a few squares sprinkled in for those of us who were into doing that sort of thing.

Mary Yeah, what pulled you into the dance scene? When you say the rest is history, what was the hook?

Cis Well, the music, of course and just discovering...I always liked to dance, but, you know, kind of boogie dance, whatever. And being welcomed by that friend of my brother's and his wife and, just finding my people, that is what it felt like. And then gradually, more and more that's where I found my friends. I mean, right now there are very few friends that I didn't meet at a contra dance or some kind of a dance, but probably contra. So it's sort of become, as for many of us I guess it's the case, it's become my community. These are the people that I spend holidays with and see and such. So, you know, it just evolved but it was over time. And of course, the only person that I spend a lot of time with who is not from the dance community is my boyfriend.

Mary Isn't it funny how that happens sometimes?

Cis It is. Yeah, exactly.

Mary It can kind of go either way. But it's good. It's good to have that balance, you know.

Cis It is.

Mary Yes, to have someone that's got a different perspective.

Cis Right, who's not deeply immersed, indeed.

Mary And so when Sandy had you up there calling, were you calling a square or a contra?

Cis No, no, I always called contras. It took me a while to discover squares, and actually other people got me down the square route. Even though Sandy's a square caller, a great square caller. By the time I was calling for a bit, actually, I think the first memory I had of some conversation about it was Kathy Anderson, whom I admire greatly and love dancing to, and really love as a person, she asked me at some point, "Are you calling squares yet?" And I said, "No, I'm kind of scared." And she said, "Oh, you will love them!"

Actually, what kickstarted, for me, for calling squares was I took Larry Edelman's square dance callers course at Augusta in West Virginia. Back when I took it, early on, it was all day for the whole week. In other words, we'd have morning, then we'd have lunch and then we'd have afternoon. So we were doing square calling all the time. I think in later years, it got to be like a half day and then people would do other things, but it was deeply immersive. Larry is a wonderful teacher. My memory is that his actual job out in the real world was learning styles. He was an expert in learning styles in general, not just dance learning. So the syllabus he put together and the way he presented it was just perfect. It was just fabulous.

At the time that I took that, I was living in Florida, I had moved to Florida for a few years. So when I got back to Florida, a friend of mine who lived in a nearby town, had built himself a dance floor out back of his house. And so I said, "Okay, if I promise to buy the beer, can I come and practice calling squares at your house?" And the word went out to the musicians, and I bought a case of beer and a bunch of dancers came and they let me stumble through and practice and get better at it. I've often told people when they ask me "How do I learn to call squares?" Find eight friends and put on some music and you know, it helps to buy the beer, but you don't have to.

The learning process

Mary I love that. So I wonder, can you take me a little bit more through your learning process as a caller? Because I always find that interesting and it can give a great snapshot, both of kind of the environment you're in, which you've already started describing, sort of some of these influences, some some big names. And I mean, I certainly associate you with square dance calling. So it's interesting to hear how that wasn't your starting point. But some of these other luminaries, Sandy Bradley, Larry Edelman, Kathy Anderson are kind of calling you in. But if you take yourself back, what were some of the stepping stones? What do you remember about finding your way to really solid footing as a caller?

Cis Going from zero to whatever. After that weekend, some of us from the weekend, some people said, "No, I don't want to do that again." But some of us realized that we would like to learn, but we had callers here who were more than happy to be mentors that called in Atlanta because they were anxious to have more people to call. So, one of my local mentors, actually a couple of them, but one in particular... I would work out a program, well, actually, first I would ask her, "Can I call it dance in your program?" And she said, "Of course." And she would help me figure out what to call and how to say it and all that stuff and then once I graduated to either do a half night or a full night, I would still bring my entire program to her and say, "Okay, does this look good is there anything you would suggest?" So she'd help me, evaluate and see if I'd bitten off more than I can chew or what order things might want to be in and that kind of thing. So I had a whole lot of support from local folks.

Fy friend Susan Davis was one of them was particularly helpful in that, and her husband, Scott Russell, were some of the people who started the dancing here and are still involved. And like I said, just starting out with a dance or two and then another person who had started at the same weekend, he and I split a night or two. And since our group danced every Friday, there were quite a few times that we could plug in somewhere. So it didn't

take a really long time to get to the point of feeling like I could try and do a half dance, and then I could maybe do a whole dance. This was in, like I said, '85. In 88, I moved to Florida, as I mentioned, to Gainesville, Florida, and lived there for a few years. When I moved down there, I had started calling regular dances because I was calling when I got down there. And there was a sort of a ready made group of friends to plug into because there was a dance group there. One of the folks in Gainesville where I lived, actually put on a dance a week so I got hired to call a week before I ever called a weekend.

Mary Oh my gosh.

Cis Because he wanted a local caller and then the out of town person that he'd hired. And that week, it was between Christmas and New Year so it was a little bit less than a week, but it definitely was five days, something like that or six. The week before that happened, before that week started I lost my dance cards.

Mary Oh my gosh!

Cis They were on the top of my car and I drove away without them.

Mary I am cringing.

Cis You can just feel it, right? You get this sinking feeling in your stomach. And just serendipity, I had been at some dance weekend or something in the previous, I don't know, month or whatever, and noticed that that person there had a bunch of cards that were typed up. And I thought, well, I said, "That's really cool." He said, "Oh yeah, I've got a database. I keep them in, if you want a copy of my database, give me the money for the printing and the postage and I'll send it to you." So in the mail that week, before the week started, I got this big box of cards so that saved my bacon. I just had to learn a few dances, but it was very fortuitous. So that was entertaining.

Mary Absolutely. And I'm just curious what parts of being a caller kind of sparked for you? I mean, it sounds like you're kind of focusing on programming and choosing dances.

Cis Actually, I don't know what kept me doing it, because I often said for the first, maybe five years that I was calling before every single dance, I'd have to promise myself, "I'll never make you do this again." Because my stage fright was so bad, I was like, "What on earth was I thinking? Why am I doing this? Oh my God, I'm going to die." And it would invariably go well enough that I would forget. So I would agree to do it again and then again I'd go through that same cycle of "Oh my God, why did I do this?"

Sticking with it; supporting the community

And, it was not until, I guess about five years in, that I finally heard..I used to back in the day especially, tell people, you know, new people out on the floor, "If you're doing it right, that's great. But if you're having a good time, that's fine, it isn't all about doing it right." And I finally heard what I said, and I realized that it might apply to me too. And it took awhile, but I finally internalized that so the horrific stage fright finally dissipated. Although it is still...once in a blue moon I'll get a little nervous. But man, it is kind of amazing that I stuck with it during all that time, because I was really petrified every time I got on stage.

Mary That is an amazing story and thank goodness, thank goodness you persevered. So then it sounds like back in Atlanta and in your local community—well wherever you've been but I know you've been in Atlanta for maybe the longest at this point—but it sounds like you've gotten pretty involved in lots of different facets of the dance community.

Cis Yeah.

Mary ...and do you organize series at all?

Cis Yeah, our group, I've been on the, what we call the steering committee, the board, a number of times. I was actually on the board when Covid hit. I was president of the board when Covid hit. But in previous years, I'd been on it before and then off it. So people step up to the plate every once in a while and there's nine folks. So we go through every year trying to find three more that will take the place of the three who are rolling off, that sort of thing. So, yes, I've been involved in putting on things, the organizing part and been in charge of our dance weekend, a number of times. You know the chairperson of that, not in the last few years, but over the years, 2 or 3 times.

I love doing things like callers' workshops. We haven't done one here in a long time, but in a way we have because, Seth Tephner, you probably know Seth, also lives here, and he's a real dynamo. So at one point about, I don't know, maybe a couple years ago, he decided or put out the word that he would offer a caller's workshop, a callers class, and a bunch of folks met. It was toward the end of the Covid era, because I remember we were sitting outside and one would only do it if we were able to do it where there was fresh air and distance and all that kind of thing. So he had some wonderful things that he's printed up, some dances printed up and some suggestions and things you have for a caller's class.

A number of folks started and then some fell by the wayside, but some have stuck with it. After a little while, one of the folks in the group started saying, "Well, why don't we all meet at my house on Wednesday nights and we'll just practice?" So now, even now, and this is at least two years, maybe two and a half, three years, it's been going on every Wednesday night at this person's house—I was just there last night, as a matter of fact. Folks will bring a dance to try and call. And now, we've got a few musicians that sit in sometimes, and it's just a very friendly little dance. I sometimes sort of mentor folks, or if they have questions, they can check in with me when I'm there. And Seth comes too and sometimes either one of us will also...we have a dance we'd like to try out that we're going to call at some weekend, and we need to make sure it works...things like that. So, it's fun. I really love doing caller's workshops at weekends and weeks and such and it's been really nice to have some folks here in town that we can watch move through the process of learning how to do this.

Mary Yeah, it sounds like it keeps it kind of fresh for you.

Cis Yeah, sometimes I'm thinking, "Hmm I'm ready to hang it up," and then I get to do something like this and I remember how much I like watching the light bulb go on and that kind of thing.

Encouraging new callers

Mary Yeah. So what are some of the things that you highlight for new callers when you're kind of breaking down the nuts and bolts of how to call? Where do you start?

Cis What I usually start with is what is, as you know, as a caller, probably one of the least important parts but the part that people think is the hard part, which is figuring out how to say what you need to say when you need to say it. And I learned an exercise years ago from that mentor that I talked about, Susan Davis. She did this in a callers workshop once and I thought, this is so cool. So I always tell people first thing, as you know, you have to finish saying what you're going to say before they do it. So rather than listening to the one, which...you have to make sure everybody knows what you mean by listening to the one, of those eight beats, that you have to listen to the five, six, seven, eight or the seven eight. So this exercise she gave me and I tell them you can do this and you can do it driving around in your car or sitting at home listening to music.

Just put on a record and listen to it and count, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. And go: "One-two-three-four, *with somebody, do the next thing*, doo doo doo doo doo doo doo doo doo, *with somebody do the next thing*." So you don't have to think about anything other than hearing when to say something. And then after you really get good at it, you go "Dun dun dun dun, dun, dun *do the next thing*." So you can listen for the seven-eight. So get that out of the way and people go "Oh that's when you...oh!" And then you get to the meat of the matter, all the other stuff that's so important, how to teach and then eventually programming. But you know, how to explain a dance of course is the most important part, because if you teach it well, then all you're doing is reminding them. So then we have some exercises about how to teach, that sort of stuff. But usually, if you do a workshop at a weekend, you basically get an hour and a half at most. So we're getting to the point that everybody can say something and can call along with you when you call a dance and then talk about how to practice at home.

Mary What a great crash course and I love that exercise. I've never heard that before.

Cis Isn't that the best? Isn't that great? And I tell them, if you can't even remember those words, just go, "blah da da duh duh dat." Just get your mouth moving.

Mary Absolutely.

Cis The other thing I always try and tell people, but not everybody does it, is to *move*. Talk in time to the music now, just walk around your house and talk in time to the music. Because if you're just talking and you're telling me to do a ladies chain, that's very different than, "face a-cross and a-ladies-chain." So, you know, getting them to recognize the reason people might walk in time to the music because your voice is what they're queuing to. So yeah, little details like that.

Mary I love that, and it's such good advice to think about, you know, involving your body too. Just because...I'm kind of like a meta kind of person. Like I'm always kind of like, how is this working and observing myself, I really notice, you know, if I'm calling a dance that I know really well and I'm in that place where I just don't even have to think about it. But it's so clear to me that in some way, like I'm doing the dance in my body, even if I am standing at the mic and really just kind of wiggling around a little bit.

Cis Exactly. You got to bounce up and down.

Mary I'm doing the chain, I am doing the lines forward and back.

Cis You've got it.

[*Cis calling the dance Reel to Reel by Cary Ravitz with music by Barefoot (Ed Howe and Jamie Oshima) at the 2015 - Atlanta Dance Weekend with the Chattahoochee Country Dancers*]

Mary Yeah. And then it's just such the big space from being in sync like that and then sort of being at the very beginning where it's like, "What do I say? What's the relationship between me and the music and the dancers and... And so then when you started delving into squares, I mean, that's often for people who start with contra, which is very formulaic, that's often kind of the big jump where there's so much more freedom. The caller is responsible...really for every beat of music and every movement that happens. You said you'd been a little nervous about squares. So how was it once Kathy and Larry kind of brought you in?

Learning to call squares

Cis It took a while because, like you say, it's very formulaic to do contras. You can start off by calling New England squares and it's just like calling a contra in a square. But I'd personally rather dance a contra than a New England square, generally, because, you know, you're doing the same moves, but you can do it for longer than a contra. So it was definitely Larry's workshop that got me recognizing that you don't have to fit it to 32 bars, you know, as long as you can keep them moving. He tried to teach us a little bit about how you could plan your breaks to make them fit 32 bars if you wanted. A promenade takes eight beats, or halfway, or 16 beats all the way and that kind of thing. So you can time it but to recognize and to let go a little bit of having to be in the 32 bar mode.

I'm still not that good at what people like Phil Jamison do really well, which is the southern squares where you're just on the beat, it has nothing to do with the phrase because I'm still so clued in to the phrase that I can call a square and have them start on the beginning of the A2, but I'm going to have them swing to the end of the A1. Part of it's because I'm always calling to contra dancers so they are more comfortable if I don't start them in the middle of a phrase with something. But, still it's very freeing to recognize that you don't have to wait till the A1, you don't have them standing around all the way to the end of the B2. So, it took a while, but practicing with friends where you don't have a roomful of people waiting to see if you can do it right, you know. You just got a square or two of people who are rooting for you because they just want to have a good time.

The other thing I found that worked for me was calling in the square, because then you can just keep it moving. You don't want to stand still, so you'll just have them do stuff, you know, just kind of make things up. And get everybody moving with yourself involved, because then you know when to call the next thing, which only works if you have one square, but still. So that helped me. I love calling squares, but figuring out which ones for what crowd is always...I have a very small set that I can call at our local dance just in my back pocket that I know will easily work.

Another reason I don't much care for New England squares is most of them change partners, and my philosophy is most contra dancers ask somebody to dance and they want to dance with them. So I like squares where you do stuff and end up back with your partner, for contra dance scenes. So there's a few of them that I know that work pretty invariably and then there's some others that, depending on the crowd, you can, you know, try some of those. But since I don't call every single week, I can get by with this fairly small batch of squares that I can pull out when I need them.

But that crowd that I called for, the British people over in Spain, they love squares because they would rather do something involved. I think people that are used to doing English dancing, like the patterns and such that go along with that. So squares offer a pattern and it isn't just about two swings and a little bit of filler, which is what a lot of modern contra dancing is these days. So they would be happy doing contra dances with one swing, but with interesting choreography. And they love squares because it's going to be interesting choreography. So, I had to really dig again to remember what I call when I do a week long squares workshop.

Mary Yeah. So it sounds like you're incorporating squares where you can, but are you predominantly calling contras or do you try to make sure you still kind of have that mix of traditions that you started out with?

Cis Depends on where I am and what they want. You know, locally I will always call a circle in an evening, like a local Friday night dance. I'll always call a circle, at least one square, maybe two at least, maybe a four-face-four depending on how much time we've got and all that stuff. But it's still going to be three quarters contras or at least two thirds contras. And that's just kind of the norm here, which is...I'm not bucking the trend. I guess I could push it because it's local and they're not going to kick me out. But when I'm calling like a weekend somewhere else, I'll ask them what they want. There are weekends that have told me "Please, no squares." I'll do what they want, you know, I'm the hired help. But if they will allow me to call a square, I will do that.

It is funny because there's a lot of people who think they don't like squares and some of them come up to me and kind of like, "Won't tell anybody, but that was really fun, I really liked that." So it's, you know, it would be nice if there was a little bit more...part of the problem is that people don't get to call squares, so they don't get that good at it. So people think they aren't any fun because people who are calling them, they don't get to call them very often. So it's kind of a vicious circle as far as the squares falling out of the repertoire, I think.

Mary Do you enjoy when you kind of maybe have a convert? Is that satisfying?

Cis It's thrilling. Anytime anybody comes up and says, "Are you going to call any squares?" Or "I really like that, call another one." It's just because it's so rare or it's not the norm. There's still places where people will sit down if I say it's a square. But I figure, you know, they get a break, it's all right, it's a short one. So don't worry about it, you'll be fine.

Mary You sound very unflappable.

Cis Well, you know, we're here to have a good time, and I want people to have a good time. And if they're not going to have fun doing something that I like to call then I won't do that, it's fine. I have other things I can call, but personally, if I go to a dance and it's all contras, I often leave at the break because I get kind of bored. Plus, my hips start to dog, you know body parts are starting to say, yeah, all this round and round, is a lot.

Learning new things; keeping it fresh

Mary Are there things that have challenged you over the years? I think we all have different ebbs and flows with anything that we do in life. But have there been moments that give you pause?

Cis I don't know. You mean in terms of the dance scene and that kind of stuff?

Mary Yeah, or your role as a caller, how it fits into your life. I guess I'm just curious about people's relationship to calling over time.

Cis Well, before the pandemic, I was making about half of my income as a dance caller and about half as a Tai Chi teacher.

Mary Wow!

Cis Now I teach one Tai Chi class and I call every once in a while. So most of my income is coming from Social Security. But I haven't worked a regular salary, straight job in an office since '03 when I got laid off the first time.

Mary Wow!

Cis I was a software engineer, so I'd been working in computers for a number of years, so fortunately had a bit of a cushion and, after that, just sort of trying to figure out what I wanted to do and stumbled into learning how to teach Tai chi. So that became more and more of my income and my activities. But during that time, I was also already on the calling circuit and still doing more and more of that so those two were with the big pieces of what I focus my time and energy on. It's interesting, now, actually, for years I've been calling contras and traditional squares. Now, our local English group, I've been calling for English for the last, I don't know how many years, 4 or 5 years maybe locally. For Christmas week, I agreed to be the English caller at the John C. Campbell Folk School for the week between Christmas and New Year's, which was quite a project. Because you can imagine, I had two workshops a day and seven nights of dancing, 6 or 7, I forget. I really had to beef up my repertoire quite a bit. My band was a local band that likes to practice, so I had to give them an idea of what I was going to call and I actually sort of punted, and I think I gave them 150 tunes that we might use. And they were like aaaaahhh! But we did end up using about, I don't know, 65 of them in the course of that week. So that was the hardest I've worked at a dance thing in a very long time. But it was an interesting project, learning to do something new like that.

Mary Yeah and I mean, having a week to work with it, I mean, that must have paid off in terms of getting that material under your belt.

Cis Yeah, well, there's a lot of it. But it also was challenging because we had a small turnout for the thing. So, figuring out what would actually work with the people there and all that stuff. That's always the way it is at a dance event, but for contras I can do that without having to think about it too hard because I've done it for so long. But the English was like, "Ooh, I don't know, will this dance work well with this crowd?" So I'm still finding my way on the English front, but it's fun. I love the process of learning something new because English, of course, there's a lot more to think about when you're programming an English dance. You know with key and meter and formation and all those things, which is what makes English so much fun. So that's one of my newer dance projects. The other new dance project is that I am currently the caller for my local gay square dance group, modern

western squares. So I'm also learning how to call modern Western squares in the last several years, and I'm still learning and that one is going to be a really long process.

Mary Wonderful.

Cis So it's keeping me interested but every once in a while I think, "Okay, I'm ready to retire. I just want to stay home and cook and read."

Mary Can you share more about the modern Western scene where you are and what it's been like to learn that repertoire?

Cis Yeah, it's a whole different thing. It's very much a different thing. I'd heard about that sort of thing for years, but I also used to always kind of look down my nose at it like, oh, you have to go to classes, I'm not going to do that. And then I was calling at the Christmas week at Berea, actually, a number of years ago, and teaching, among other things, a square dance class all week. One of the people in the class asked me at one point after class, "Have you ever done any modern Western?" And I said, "No, I've thought about it that, I've heard that if I wanted to do it, I should find a gay square dance group because they're more fun," which is just the rumors that I had heard. He said, "Oh my goodness there's a great group in Atlanta, the "Hotlanta Squares," they're really wonderful and they are putting on the National Gay Square Dancing Convention next year." So I said, okay, and I came home and found that group and, and started taking the classes and learned enough to go to the convention.

What I love about the gay side of the modern Western square dancing scene is that like contras people change partners all the time and anybody will dance with anybody. As opposed to what normally happens in the kind of traditional great modern Western world is you dance with your partner and that's where the matching skirts and the string ties and all that stuff. And if there's any mixing around, it's usually this couple moves to that square kind of thing rather than what we do in contra. So it always has felt much more familiar to me because people are so willing to change around and invite everybody in. One of the things that really stuck in my mind when I went to that very first convention—and I had not been dancing all that long, you know, five months, six months—the very first night I went out on the floor and I was like, "I need a boy," which is how you do it, you stand in the square and put up your hand, "I need a boy." And somebody I'd never met walked up and said, you know, let's dance. And so therefore, even more so than contra, you don't have to find a partner to go out on the floor, you go out on the floor and a partner will find you, which I think is just delightful.

So anyway, once I got started with that, I got really interested in coming. I mean, the group I dance with is really nice and friendly, and...one of the things I love about English dancing is the patterns are really interesting and it's great brain work. You just have to follow the pattern and you have to learn the names of the moves, and you have to be able to react to what the caller says. So it's like doing a no walk through contra all the time. You know, it's a hash contra, basically, except there's a whole lot more moves, which is why you have to go to class, because you have to be able to react to any of this, say, 100 moves. That is the basic, what they call mainstream level. A lot of them we already know, ladies chain, right and left through, and then there's "scoot back and boys run in" and all these other things that aren't part of our repertoire.

So I now understand why you have to go to classes to go. But it's kind of, I wouldn't say dying out, but it's hard to get new people to come because it isn't like a contra, you can't

just walk in off the street and dance the first night. You have to commit to these classes so that when you go to a dance, you can react to what the caller says, and not a whole lot of people are willing to put up with learning that many moves before they're officially allowed to dance. So it's a quandary because those of us who like the pattern and the complication and all that stuff are happy we put the time in and would love other people to do it. But I understand totally that it would be nice if we had only 50 moves to work with, or 30 moves to work with. You know, something kind of like the sort of thing that we can do for no walk through contras.

Mary I love it. It sounds like such a fascinating new space for you to explore and also just find some of those elements that you love: community and connection. I've certainly sort of heard that story of modern Western square dancing as the specialization just grew and grew and then the numbers dwindled. It's kind of like you're in and you're all the way in, and then that learning curve kind of gets steep. I've also heard people theorize that contra dancing is creeping that way.

Cis It's a cautionary tale.

Mary Is that something that you sort of observe or think about?

Cis Yes. I don't think we are likely to get that far, but anytime some new move is introduced, it's fine, as long as you're willing to teach it every time you have a new group of people, but you don't want to have to come up with, for example, "swing through", is the name of "half by the right, half by the left." Well, you can say "turn half by the right and half by the left," rather than teaching them a new move called swing through. So my urge is that callers don't use another name for something that they can prompt, so that the number of moves that people have to understand the meaning of is kept at a reasonable level. The ones that we do regularly, I mean, people make up new moves like mad robin or ricochet or whatever, and it's great as long as you explain it. Then once they understand it, it's, you know, it's part of their repertoire. I don't know how many more new moves are likely to get introduced because we have a limited four people or a long line of people or whatever. So other than putting together the things we already know, there aren't that many topographically or geometrically possible things that one could create that need a whole new naming convention and all that sort of stuff. But yeah, it's definitely a cautionary tale that I would say people should pay attention to.

And, you know, the whole techno contra, which I think is really fun every once in a while, I don't think it's likely to take over. But that's what happened in square dancing, it used to always be live bands. Now it's almost always to records. And again, it's not something that I see us going down that road, but it's something that I would hate to see us going down that road because the joy of contra dancing largely is dancing to those incredible musicians that we are lucky enough to know and meet and grow and all that. I would really hate it if that became less and less the norm. Which again, I don't see that happening and I think techno was just a nice sideline. But that is the fear that some people had when techno began to get known around the country. It's like, "Oh no, we need to keep live music."

Mary Yup, and so far, I totally agree. It is a fun, playful new thing that's great to have on the menu, but yeah, there's nothing like that live band. Do you play any music yourself?

Cis No, I don't. I own several instruments, but no, I don't play them. And I love to sing, but I don't sing that much, even when I'm calling squares, I don't sing like I should.

Developing presence and voice as a caller

Mary Well, yeah, that's a whole part of the art form, isn't it? The voice in square dancing. How did you find your square caller patter and presence? Because that's sort of a whole other realm that you enter into and I think there's a lot to do with using your voice as a contra dance caller, too.

Cis There is.

Mary But squares are different.

Cis They are. And actually in modern Western not everybody even uses it as much as you would expect. You know, the professionals do, the ones who travel and the ones who record are very good in rhythmic and they make it all fit the music well, not fit the phrase, but for the music, the beat and and of course for singing squares, you have to fit the music. But actually, when I'm calling squares—like contra type squares, not the modern western—I'm rhythmic, and I can make it fit really well. You know, I'm pretty at ease with that. But, of course, those kind of squares, I'll teach the square, and then people are just reacting to what I say, and I just keep them moving. And it isn't like you have to make it up as you go along which is what a really good modern Western square dance caller does, I can't do that at all.

I mean, I think it's important, as we were talking about earlier, I think it's important to be rhythmic when you're calling contras too, but it's really important when you're calling squares, because you are the vocalist for the band. Basically like you are singing a song, except you're not singing, you're doing it in a rhythmic talking way, ideally. And I could make up breaks and things like that but like I said, I'm a little nervous about singing squares, so I kind of back off on that and I don't really do it like I should. Because in theory, in modern Western you do patter and then you do a singing call, you do patter and then you do a singing call. I just basically kind of chicken out and I just teach them a lot of stuff with patter and then wait till they go to a dance and they have to struggle through a singing call. So I'm not doing the best job I could for my square dance students.

Mary Well, you find your comfort zone. I didn't know about the presence of singing calls in modern Western.

Cis Yeah, that's the tradition at a dance. They call it a "tip." A tip is like a batch of dancing before you sit down. A tip is usually made up of a bunch of patter, you know, they'll have you do a bunch of things and get back to your partner, and do more things, get back to your partner, allemande left, right, left, right, and all that stuff. And then they'll do a singing call, and then you go sit down for a few minutes, and then you come back and do another tip. So that's kind of traditional version and the singing squares that we do as part of contra world are from that tradition, but from back in the day. You know, like "Because, Just Because," all the ones that we have done with wonderful callers, like Ralph Sweet and such. That's just what they were doing back then, along with patter and those are the ones that have survived into the contra dance scene from back in the day. The problem with singing calls is you have to buy the music from one of the sites where they have programmed it to fit 32 bars, because there's a format just like there is for all the ones that we do at contra dances, the singing calls. And each tune is like seven bucks.

Mary You have to invest.

Cis Yeah, you have to invest in your library. So I've got a few that I know well, Summertime and King of the Road, old fave songs that I feel like I can pull off. But I'm still nervous about doing it in such a way that people can actually get through it without stumbling and getting all confused. So I start a whole new class of beginners next week, so I'm determined I'm going to do more singing calls for them.

Mary Oh, good for you. I wish you luck. It's always great, as you said, to be learning something new.

[[Cis calling a square dance with music by The Figments \(Ethan Hazzard-Watkins, Owen Morrison, and Anna Patton\) at the 2023 Epicenter Contra Dance Weekend in Mill Valley, California.](#)]

Cis Yes.

Mary Do you write any dances as choreography in your toolbox as well?

Cis A few, there's a few that I've written that people call and that I've called. I've written a few more than that, but they really weren't worth much, you know, just for an occasion. Just for, I needed something or other. As a matter of fact I wrote one when I was in Spain or actually on the way to Spain, but I haven't tried it yet with real people, so I don't know if it'll work. But it's not one of my main skills. There's so many great dances out there, so I just interpret. I follow the people who I know are good. Chris Page and Rick Mohr and some of those people that I can trust and all of their dances are going to work.

Mary Yeah, there's so much out there and I know sometimes, even just, like, making little adaptations to dances that exist, too...

Cis Exactly, I do that, too. Yeah, this time I think we'll turn one into a do-si-do and swing instead of a balance and swing or, I think I'll put in a long lines forward and back instead of a whatever, you know.

Touring as a caller

Mary In response to the situation or the dancers that you're working with. And so you mentioned you were in Spain recently, what has your touring caller life looked like over the years and what is it presently?

Cis Well, I don't really tour in the States anymore just because, you know, if you break even, you're doing well and it's exhausting and all that sort of stuff. It was fun back early on but I'm too old for this stuff now unless there's a band I just really want to hang out with. But if I get hired for a weekend, I might do the local dance, so the night before or something like that. But in England, I've been over there many, many times and usually end up doing a bunch of local dances in addition to some weekend event that has helped me pay for my travel. You know, it's basically, again, if you break even, that's fine. But it's mostly I get to go to England!. And the same, I've been to Denmark a number of times too, and that's always for a weekend and occasionally I'll do a couple of local things, because my friends who put me up have a group and I'll come and call for them, that kind of thing.

But generally it's just coming to do a weekend. And when they bring you over to Denmark, they basically just pay for your airfare. They kind of figure, you know, we'll get you over here. It's not like you're making money off of the gig, but you get to come to Denmark. So that's fun. Those are the only, besides this group that puts on the Spain, Portugal stuff, those are the only international...well Canada but you know, that's is practically here.

Mary Sure. Sure, and what's it like calling. American social dancing in Europe?

Cis Well, in England it's interesting. I started going '03- ish, when I first started going to England? I'd have to look it up. But anyway, when I first started going to England, the folks who did contra did it kind of like they do their English dance over there, which is a little bit plodding and the music was a little, heavy, you know, it was not like...they'll play maybe an American contra dance tune, but it's still in an English style. But over the years, more and more people from there have either listened a lot to recordings or have been over here, or enough American bands have come over that they've gotten the sense of, this is a little bit of a different thing. So the music has gotten better for contra dancing over the years.

And some of the folks in England, the way they do it is they have dance clubs generally, sort of like the square dances over here. You know, on Wednesday night, they're going to the dance club. And at their dance clubs they'll often do an English and then a square and then a contra and a triplet and, you know, kind of like we used to do. But the people in those clubs are usually still doing the contras and the squares, in kind of the same style as they do what they call social dance, which is what we call English dance. But then in the last 10 or 15, 20 years, some groups have popped up that just do contra primarily or contra and squares, American basically. Those are usually like a Friday night or Saturday night. They're more like a dance dance as opposed to a weekly club kind of thing. As the bands have gotten better and more of those groups have started, and there's a subculture now over in England that shoots for doing contras and squares, kind of like we do, and it's fun to see that progression. The music has changed, the dancing has changed and somewhat the calling has changed. I mean, there's younger callers taking this up too. I remember the first time I went to England and I went to a dance and the caller there, he was kind of, making fun of the dancers, you know, like...supposedly people he knew. But it was like that insulting banter back and forth or saying something like, "If you don't know your right from your left, I can't help you," that kind of thing. Ha ha ha, very cute. Well, I just wanted to slap him. I was like, that's not the way we do it here!

And over the years it's gotten...I think of it as kind of the, the British schoolmaster kind of vibe, and that has evolved over the years to being a lot more like what we're used to—people being really nice to the dancers and taking responsibility and emphasizing making it fun and that's been really nice to watch. I mean, just because that's the way I like to have a dance happen. I'd like to be at a dance where people are nice to me. And, so it's been interesting watching that since I've been going over there for the last maybe 20 years, just seeing the change over time. The first time I went over was because there was a dancer, a fellow named...it'll come to me. There was a dancer from England who came over here and actually came to one of those weeks that my friend put on in Florida. That was his first experience of American dancing. And he had so much fun that he came back the next November to our local dance weekend, and he had a good time, but he didn't really get to interact with people that much. So he let it be known to the people he was staying with, "I would really love at least a pen pal or two so if I ever come back, I will know people."

So I thought, well, that's nice, so I wrote back and said, oh yeah, I'd love to meet you and he was just all excited because the caller was the one that it was. So next thing I knew, he had me booked for a folk festival over there and Airdance, do you remember Airdance? Rodney Miller's Airdance? That was the first time they went over and they were playing this folk festival, Sidmouth Folk Festival, which was the biggest folk festival in England. So they were scheduled to play at Sidmouth, and he arranged for me to call with them before I was even sure I could come. He just let me know, "You're coming." And I said, oh really? Wait a minute, I had this...so anyway, I had a gig I had to cancel but anyway, so I came over and, did a few other things with them and then got to call at this week long folk festival, which, actually...it was a real eye opener for a lot of people because, you know, Rodney Miller and company played really differently than they were used to. The places where we danced, they had it in a tent, a big tent with a stage and the dance floor put down and the line out the door before the thing was open to the people went around the tent and back because the word had gotten out that these guys were so great.

It was really fun to watch the eyes going, waking up to what dance music could be like. So I was kind of there at what felt like the beginning of English folks getting a taste of what American contra dancing is like. So that's what started me going over there. Jim Robb is the name of the gentleman that I couldn't remember, and he brought me over every once or twice a year for a number of years. Unfortunately he passed on, but a good friend of mine kind of took it on and helped me out when I can get over there. So that's the English side, and then the Danish side is a whole different thing. Because in Denmark they don't all speak English, but they all react to the calls in English. So normally the Danish callers will explain it in Danish and call it in English. But there was enough people there when I would come, who could help each other out, enough who could understand the English and such. But the reason there's even a dance scene or contra dancing in Denmark, which is aging out and kind of dying out now, was because of an American who moved over there after college in like 1970 or '75 or something like that. And she missed it, she'd been in Berea, I think is where maybe she went to school and she went over there and started teaching dances, and then she started teaching contra callers and so it just blossomed from there, it's pretty amazing.

Mary The cross pollination is just really interesting and especially with England, kind of going back to the motherland in some ways.

Cis Exactly, and bringing them something that we changed up a bit.

Closing

Mary Yes, and continue to do so. I love it. Well, I feel like we've covered lots of ground. One thing I always like to hear about is how people curate and kind of store and organize their dance collections.

Cis Yes, yes.

Mary Once you recovered or restarted your dance collection, you probably became very meticulous about how you...

Cis Not so much, you'd think I would, actually, you'd think I would be making copies of all my cards over the years. But actually, until I discovered Callers Companion, which is the

database that I rely entirely upon now. It's wonderful. It's almost exactly what I would have wanted to include if I was going to get around to writing a database.

Mary Right, which you could do.

Cis I theoretically could do, but I never did. But, yeah, almost everything that I would want in such a thing is there. I now more and more use it to plan. For a long, long time I just used it to store my dances because I just started organically putting them in as I would call something off of my cards and now most, not everything, I still have cards that aren't in there, but they are things that I haven't called in a long time. But I love that it records the sets so I know what I called last time I was there, wherever there is. Now I'm beginning to finally, more and more use it as a planning tool. I used to just use it as a recording tool. But I don't ever call off of it, and I probably never will because I really like the tactile, you know, I can shuffle those cards around and move it from here to there. If I was doing it on the computer I just know something would go wrong and the thing would die and I would be stuck. So I like having the paper copies to call off of, but I like now trying to organize it and look at it. Do you use it, by the way?

Mary I don't actually, I am still cards only.

Cis I love it, like I said, because it records it and because it's a copy now of all of the dances that I call regularly. So if I was to lose all of my cards I would have that. But also, it's a database, so you have a database of dances and you have a database of sets, which is just the list of what you called where. And you can take notes on it, I don't usually. It also has, if you create a set, you can click on something called "Program Matrix" and it will show you, does every dance have a men's allemande left in it? Oh no, maybe I'll change one of those out, you know. Or you can see how many circle left hand swings you have in the program. So you can get a kind of glimpse of what distribution of moves there are and if you have two, three in a row that start with the forward and back, oh, I didn't notice that, you know, so it's kind of a nice little double check that you could get by looking at the cards, but it's just in a sort of a spreadsheet format, this matrix that lets you just glance at it and go, yeah, that looks pretty all right.

I think it's incredible that he put it together and sells it for what I consider a very nominal fee. It's really the thing that I rely on now to not lose track of my life. But in my cards, I do still work a lot out of cards. I'll pick cards and flip through them and then I'll put it in a database. So as far as how I organize the cards, like in my box, I mean, I have thousands of cards, but if I narrow them down to a box that I'm going to bring with me, if I'm going to do a weekend or something. My current system is I clip together, paper clip together all the ones I'm bringing along that have a Mad Robin and all the ones that are Heys. So basically, the sort of significant feature of that particular dance that I wouldn't call too often in a program. You know, like if I'm going to do a Mad Robin, I'm just going to probably do one in this set, you know. So I know, of this batch, I'm going to do one of these. And basically there's a lot of dances that are kind of generic or don't have any particular moves, it's just the combination that's fun. So those are all loose, but the ones that are in little clips, I know I can make sure that, it sort of narrows down the ones I have to look at, but it knows that I do want to get one of these with a ricochet, or I want to call a hey sometime, you know? So that's my attempt at organization. Plus, of course, I have the contras together and the circles together and the squares together in my box.

Mary How big is your box? Have you had to move gradually into...

Cis I've got umpteen boxes, but you know, I just do a three by five. I've never gone to the bigger cards. I just narrow it down to what I need, what I'm going to use this week. But I also bring along blank cards, and I have my database with me on my iPad. So if I get there and after calling Friday night, I realize I need some easier dances or I need some trickier stuff, then I'll flip through the database and maybe write out a few cards that I didn't bring with me. So it's sort of a hybrid situation. I rely on the cards, but I have this backed up with me so that I don't kick myself for having left some of my cards at home.

Mary That's nice. And squares, you also keep in that same system?

Cis I do, although, you know, squares are a little trickier to write out. I type in enough of it that I can figure out what it is. And there's a bunch of squares that I have on cards that are not in the database because I've either never called them or...probably never called them, or I've only called them at week long square dance things and I've just never actually bothered to type them in.

Mary Do you keep breaks in there too, or are the breaks just all in your head?

Cis No, no, I keep them in there too. Because when I record, I will, if I'm writing down what I did in the set portion, I do have the square and the break so I can remember, okay, I already did that grand square, I want to do something else, you know. Especially when I'm doing a week long square dance workshop, it's nice to remember which breaks I did with which dances and what I've got left that I could work with.

Mary Yeah. It's interesting how callers are sort of by necessity collectors of material. But is that something that you also liked about becoming a caller? Did you kind of already have a collector mentality in any way, or is it just...

Cis I guess probably, I don't know. I'm trying to think of if there's any other aspect of my life that I accumulate. Recipes...but once I started calling, I started buying dance books and all that sort of thing. So I do have an entire wall of dance books that I don't look through that much anymore. But they are there if I ever get inspired. And then English is a whole different...I mean, English, I type into a word document that I have this table that I have just created. So I'm calling English off of these 8.5x11 sheets of paper because they are not going to see them. So I haven't actually gotten a really efficient method for my English stuff, but I may not need that. Like, you know, I don't have to travel with a box of English cards.

Mary Do you have any pre- or post-dance rituals when you're kind of getting ready for a gig, is there anything that you like to do to make sure you're ready to step on stage or kind of wind down afterwards?

Cis I don't really yeah. I don't, I mean, I talk about things that you should do but I never do them.

Mary Yeah. You just show up and dive in.

Cis Yeah, pretty much, just get there.

Mary When you finish a dance, are you ready to hang out and socialize? Are you ready to go along home?

Cis It depends. Yeah, like calling the local dance here, I'm ready to go home and just chill but I'm not ready to go to sleep. You probably find this, too. You're kind of up after you've been on stage, so you gotta wind down somehow. And at a weekend or something I do love to just sit and hang out with the band or whoever, you know, whoever's hang out-able and maybe, you know, snack on some stuff, maybe a glass of wine, maybe not. But, you know, just wind down slowly as opposed to just going to bed, I can't quite shut it down that quickly.

Mary Well, and my last question kind of relates to that, but I have been asking everyone that I talk to on the podcast, if you know, if you are an introvert or an extrovert?

Cis I think I would probably, if I have to pick one, it would be extrovert, mostly because...

Mary I think it's a spectrum.

Cis It is definitely a spectrum. I'm a little more on the extrovert side, partly because, at least my estimate, and I'm an armchair psychologist here, but I am pretty comfortable just sort of being thrown into a group of people that I don't know. I can usually figure out some way to have a conversation or whatever. The older I get, the more I like having time on my own, you know, like chill time or just personal time but I don't have to have it. I mean, I know people that would probably rank themselves as complete introverts who really have to have a lot of downtime and a lot of privacy, and I need that but not to the extent that some folks I know do. So I think probably I am on the extroverted half, but not way out at the end.

Mary It's interesting. I mean, I find that it's a whole range and I ask about it just because part of being a caller involves kind of being at the center of a large group of people. It's interesting that people who relate differently to that introvert/extrovert scale, you know, there's a different way for everyone to come to it.

Cis There is. It's interesting, there are certain callers, and I don't need to mention any names, but there are some well-known callers whom I know who are on stage, they seem to be such an extrovert. And when you get them off stage, you can't get a word out of them. I think that they are truly introverts who can put on the mask of being an extrovert to perform. And you kind of have to be able to do that, well, you don't have to, some people are very toned down when they call and that's fine, it's great. But, it's very interesting to me to know those folks who just really don't seem like...if you only had met them off stage, you would never guess that they were a person who could get up there and command an entire room of people and tell them what to do and keep them entertained. It's a mystery.

Mary How is that part of the job for you? Do you enjoy being on stage? Do you feel like a performer when you're in that role? I think everyone has a different approach to being at the mic.

Cis I think I feel like I am there to entertain to a point. I mean, I don't want it to be about me, but I do want people to relax and have a good time. So I want to kind of josh them long. But I really feel like I'm there kind of to facilitate the connection between the band and the dancers. So if I can get them having fun to the dance and then get the heck out of the way, then I feel like I've done my job, in that I can just groove with the band. You know, stand on stage and bounce around and throw in a word here and there if people need it. But, so yeah, I do like the entertainment aspect if I can stay relaxed and just say a couple

of funny things that will get people to relax and laugh. I'm certainly not a comedian, I can't get up and tell a joke if my life depended on it.

But I do feel like I can kind of set a relaxed and fun tone most of the time. And that's, to me, kind of my job is to get people to recognize that they're here to have a good time and the way we're going to have a good time is I'm going to show you how to do this dance thing. And I don't know about you, but when I'm looking out at a crowd and usually this is more pertinent on a local dance than in a weekend, but even in a weekend, the people I'm focused on are the new people, or the people that are least comfortable or that need more help. Everybody else, they can have a good time no matter what we do. So I figure if I can get those folks to relax and have a good time, then everybody is going to do great, everybody's going to have a wonderful evening. So I guess my primary goal is to make sure if there are any newcomers in the room they're going to have fun.

Mary And I'm sure they do. Well, Cis, it's great to get to chat with you. I regret that we haven't had more time in person.

Cis Me too!

Mary I've certainly been on the dance floor enjoying your calls. But I hope in the future that we can...

Cis Yeah, maybe sometime we'll both get to be hanging out at a weekend when neither of us is calling and we can dance!

Mary Yeah, we can dance, we can have wine after, all the things.

Cis Exactly.

Mary Wonderful, well, thank you so much!

Cis Thank you. So take care, dear, and have a good evening, and I'll see you Sunday!

Mary Thanks so much to Cis for talking with me! You can check out the show notes for today's episode at cdss.org/podcasts.

This project is supported by CDSS, The Country Dance and Song Society and is produced by Ben Williams and me, Mary Wesley.

Thanks to Great Meadow Music for the use of tunes from the album Old New England by Bob McQuillen, Jane Orzechowski & Deanna Stiles.

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Happy dancing!

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