

## Transcript - From the Mic Episode 25 - Maia McCormick

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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.

### Maia Intro

Hello and happy July From the Mic Listeners! I took a tiny summer break from the podcast here but I'm super excited to be back and bringing you another caller conversation with the wonderful Maia McCormick

Maia McCormick is a contradance caller and choreographer based in New York City. She's giggered at festivals, weekends, and dance camps from coast to coast. She started dancing during undergrad at Williams College, learned to call shortly thereafter, and has been doing it ever since. As a choreographer, she strives to write dances that are fresh, yet idiomatic; as a caller, she is passionate about keeping the dance floor safe, comfortable, and connective.

Maia earns her living as a programmer, but she says that's mostly so she can afford all the dance camps. In addition to her folkly pursuits, she directs the New York Chamber Choir, writes crossword puzzles (including a contra-themed one!), and eats tasty food at any opportunity. Here's Maia!

**Mary** Maia McCormick. Welcome to From the Mic.

**Maia** I am stoked to be here.

**Mary** Yeah, thanks for joining me. We were just saying that it's been a little while since we've seen each other IRL. But even when we have seen each other, we haven't gotten a chance to sit down and talk all things calling.

**Maia** We haven't, have we? No. That's so funny.

**Mary** I know, not on the sidelines or anything. So I'm excited for this opportunity.

**Maia** Yeah, totally.

**Mary** Would you start by just telling us a little bit about how you started dancing, how you came into the world of social dance, and how you found your way to the mic?

**Maia** Yeah. So my high school self would be shocked that I'm now a social dancer because in high school I was very physically awkward and like, "No, I hate dancing." I was in the musicals when I wasn't running lights, because of course I did that, but I was always very awkward about the dancing part and thought I was terrible at it. In college I fell in with the wrong crowd, by which I mean the Renaissance group. Because I'm a cool kid, and

have always been a cool kid. And surprising no one, the Renaissance group did all of the other nerdy stuff, and so they took me contra dancing my first month at college, and I was hooked. This was the student run dance at college. I went to college at Williams in western MA. And the overall skill level was pretty low, but we had a very good time. Very few people danced out and the band and callers were students. And so I, being a ham and liking to be in the thick of things, when they needed new callers they said, "Maia, you're good at bossing people around. Do you want to do this?" And I said, "Sure!" And that's how I learned to call.

I did not get terribly good at it terribly quickly because my only exposure was the college dance. But I started dancing out probably winter of my freshman year. Soon after I was starting to learn to call and. Eventually I took little, little gigs in western MA, driving distance from school my junior/senior year. Started gigging in New York when I was back home for breaks, and eventually got out there and actually figured out what I was doing.

**Mary** Amazing. And you're speaking to us from New York now?

**Maia** Yes, I'm in Park Slope, Brooklyn.

**Mary** Nice. And did you grow up in New York?

**Maia** I sure did. I grew up in Manhattan and now have lived in Brooklyn since graduating college.

**Mary** Nice. So you kind of came across this thing and in New England, tapped into the New England dancing a little bit. Once you got out of the Williams bubble a little bit did you start to connect with other callers? Did you have any mentors or people that you started keeping your ear tuned to what they were doing?

**Maia** Yeah, I got some lovely early mentorship from Kristin Siebert, who I have not seen around in a bit, but I hope Kristen's doing well. If you're listening, hi! And just other folks throughout the years who answered my questions and were very kind to me. I did a lot of talking on Shared Weight with all of the good advice and questionable advice that listserv entails.

**Mary** It's a wondrous thing.

**Maia** Oh, Lord. It's fascinating. I don't know if you saw, are you still subscribed to it?

**Mary** Okay, true confession I have never in my life been subscribed on Shared Weight.

**Maia** That's really fair.

**Mary** It's just, it's an amazing resource, and I have sometimes come to it with questions. I've definitely read a few threads, but, just in general, online internet conversation and sort of message board culture—I'm not fluent in it. So it's never been a space that I've done a deep dive in. But I love that it's there. I think I'm just more of a one on one conversation person—like this!

**Maia** Yep.

**Mary** And there's so much there.

**Maia** There's a lot there. Some of it is conversations I would not like to be having for the hundredth time, but much of it is very useful advice and insights. I'm trying to think; there must have been other individual humans who I would go to about my calling journey, but I am just blanking on who I know. Lindsey Dono has been a great resource. We sort of connected after I was a little more established. So that is less of a 'up and coming caller' helper and more of a 'we are peers.' But also Lindsay was way further along in calling than I was and I have learned a ton. I do in fact, try to say less and be less of a ham on the microphone and let myself fade into the background. A lot of that impetus does come from Lindsay, who is very good at just setting things in motion and then vanishing, in the best way.

**Mary** Nice. And so once you moved back to New York, did you get involved with the contra dancing there?

**Maia** Yeah, I probably started dancing at CDNY, Country Dance New York, when I was home for break from my freshman year of college, and so I was only there a couple of months out of the year. But I made connections in the in the New York scene, CDNY Village Contra, may it rest in peace, the gender free dance that used to run here. I discovered Brooklyn Contra after I graduated, it was just not quite on my radar. I never really went to Brooklyn when I was living in Manhattan—I was one of those. But now I consider Brooklyn contra my home dance. They're lovely folks, and conveniently less than a mile from my house.

**Mary** Oh, nice. Was it was it interesting to come back to the place where you grew up, but then tap into this entirely different scene and community that you hadn't known about?

**Maia** It was super cool. I had no idea there was this decidedly un-seedy underbelly to New York.

**Mary** Only C-D-N-Y.

**Maia** Ehh, ba-dum-ching. I never really got to test drive. I'm in a brand new place. I jumped into the contra community and made them my community because I did have this huge social safety net in New York, but it was really lovely to get to kind of acquire a new adult social scene moving back to the city I grew up in and was used to being a kid in. So that really helped ease my transition into being an adult human in New York.

**Mary** It sounds like you fell fast for contra dancing and then you stayed on the path of learning to call and becoming a caller, and starting to gig out. What was in it for you? What was the spark for you besides telling people what to do?

**Maia** It's not just the bossing people around. I like facilitating, like, you're not wrong, but also... That's a great question. I mean, definitely for baby Maia it was pretty cool to feel physically competent. And after so long thinking that I was just not good at moving my body, to find a space where I could do that, and I could pick it up and know that I was doing it right. And that it was very structured and easy to succeed at and to know if you were doing it right. I for sure didn't think about anything technique adjacent at first, but I have a very clear memory of my first dance out and we went to Greenfield, which is an hour away from Williams. And also, ice storm both ways and a rental car with a skid alarm. It's like—you're not already stressed out enough about losing traction. Let me scream at you when it happens.

**Mary** Oh, wow.

**Maia** So that was a stressful drive. But it was worth it. And the very first time I learned to swing properly was at this dance where the friend that I came with, May Hunter-Smith, who is now I think living in Boston, said "Maia, during the swing you don't have to jump. You can just walk." And I was like, "Whoa, this is a game changer. Everything feels so much more comfortable." And so that was the sort of like, realizing there was a different level to which I could get good at this, and that was also very exciting. The whole 'easy to learn, lifetime to master...' not lifetime to master, 3 to 5 years to master, but it was still a very cool challenge and it scratched nice itches in my brain to learn how this thing worked.

And I started attempting to write dances pretty soon after I started calling. None of them were good, but it was another way I was trying to wrap my head around this thing and really understand its ins and outs as an intellectual puzzle in addition to being a physical discipline. And so that definitely was scratching a lot of itches for me as well.

**Mary** And how did your presence at the mic develop? What was it like? Do you remember the very first time you called a dance?

**Maia** Not, not in any detail. I think I was good enough, fairly quickly because I'm also—I mean perhaps obviously from the whole Renaissance group thing, I'm a musician, I'm a singer. I was already dabbling in conducting at that point...

**Mary** Wow, conducting! Like orchestral conducting?

**Maia** Vocal music.

**Mary** Vocal, like a choir?

**Maia** Yeah. So that's my other hat is that I direct a semi-pro choir in New York.

**Mary** Oh, amazing. So another space for facilitation of a group.

**Maia** I have too many hats. Yes, I like it a lot. I joke about liking to be in charge, but it genuinely is I really enjoy facilitating and setting things in motion and helping people do their thing. So I do try to not make it entirely about me. Right, so I already had the counting and the pacing and the tone all kind of came free. And I'm embarrassed to say I didn't think about my technique in any concerted way for a very long time into my journey. I was mostly just like, "I just kind of get up at the mic and say things and it's fine, right?"

**Mary** I mean, I think that's a beauty of contra dancing or just, you know, folk traditions, that it just runs the gamut. You can get really, really precise and studied and you can not. But if it gets people moving like either way works, you know? And I'm sure along the way you learn like, "Oh, maybe I won't do that again." So were there some moments where you started developing that sense of like, "Oh, I'm going to bring certain attention to this process?"

**Maia** Yeah, since I started gigging out, I've been keeping a caller's journal. It's a big Google doc where I write down my program and observations. "Oh, this and that went well or poorly in the lesson. And I should teach this dance like this next time." I wasn't being super holistic about my growth as a caller, but I was definitely picking up bits and pieces

just from trial and error. Also, it's very cool that I have a log of every contra program I have called. Harris Lapiroff, if you're listening to this, you should make some pretty data visualizations for me, because I want to know how my repertoire has changed over the years.

**Mary** Woohoo! I want to see that.

**Maia** Right? Yeah, I predict—I don't call butterfly whirls nearly as much anymore because they're very sweaty. Any dance with a shadow swing have been excised from my collection.

**Mary** What? Why?

**Maia** Oh. Oh, yeah. I don't like calling shadow swings because it basically assigns you a partner that you did not choose to dance with. Which I think takes out an element of the the choice you get in who you get super, super smushed up to.

**Mary** Yeah, great thought.

**Maia** Also, I do a lot less of "Oh, shoot, I planned my evening poorly and I have an awkward amount of time at the end. Let me close with a no walkthrough because I don't know what else to do."

**Mary** Yeah. It's so cool that you have that log and you're still doing it.

**Maia** The log? Yeah. I mean, now sometimes the programs I post on my website, if it's a like festival program or a weekend program. I don't know if anyone uses them, but they're there.

**Mary** Yeah. You heard it here! And so what's your caller life like these days? You came back to New York, plugged into the scene there? Where did it go from there?

**Maia** Yeah. There was definitely a while that I was gigging around a lot and just kind of going anywhere that would have me, calling all the the funky little dances and random places around. Doing the little tour to the three small dances within 50 miles of each other sort of thing. It has always been a lot harder because I don't drive a lot. I do have my license. I'm very proud of that I got it after I graduated college because I'm a city kid, but I also don't have a car. For a while in my beginning callerr journey I was too young to rent. So lots of lots of Amtrak, lots of bumming rides off people. And these days, and I think especially post-pandemic, I do a lot less of the random small gigs. I have just kind of rejiggered my priorities. I'm spending a little bit more effort on choir. I still adore contra and calling is a delight, but I tend to not take the random small gigs. I mostly either do a festival or a weekend or some gig that facilitates travel. I was going to do anyway. So if I've got friends in the area, for example. And my local dance, of course.

**Mary** Yeah, that's what I was going to ask. Are you still involved with organizing any of your local dances?

**Maia** God, no. My hat is off to them. The organizers of both of my local dances are incredible, and I'm so impressed with the work they do. And I could not. I already run a small nonprofit and so I have a rule that I'm not allowed to do any dance organizing.

**Mary** It makes a lot of sense. I know it's it takes a whole combination of different people to fill those roles and it's nice to just say, you know, I can call dances and that's what I'm going to do.

**Maia** Yep. And it's also a thankless job. And so, you know, give some love to your local organizers. Like, a friend I talked to about this and she's she's like, "Yeah, you, the caller, are the face of the dances. You are up there, you are getting paid. The organizers aren't and we're kind of defacto behind the scenes."

**Mary** It's so true. And they do so, so much I mean, even just for us as callers, for but for everybody involved in the ecosystem. I mean they're just holding it, they're just holding it all up. I'm so grateful.

**Maia** So buy your local dance organizer a drink next time, y'all.

## Caller Philosophy

**Mary** Yeah! Do you have, like, a caller ethos or kind of philosophy? What are you thinking about when you're up at the mic and and about to begin a dance?

**Maia** Ooh. This is not caller specific, but talking about contra dance. So last year at Queer Contra Dance Camp on the West Coast, I did a workshop called "Contra Super Glue," which is about holding the line together. So helping beginners and helping fix things when the dance goes awry, which, you know, sure does happen sometimes. And I had this little visual aid thing called "The contra dancer hierarchy of needs." It's a pyramid much like, "Maslow's hierarchy of needs." So the bottom layer is physical safety, then emotional safety, then "the dance works," then "the dance is fancy," and on the top, "everyone wears a silly little hat."

**Mary** That's my favorite thing I've ever heard.

**Maia** Thank you. So that works, for example, emotional safety is more important than "the dance works." You don't get to yell at people or chastise them for getting the dance wrong, because that compromises their emotional safety in the name of the dance working. Physical safety is more important than emotional safety. You don't need to mince words if someone is gripping too hard and hurting you on the dance floor. You don't need to spare their feelings. You just say, "Ow!" "Dance being fancy" is less important than "the dance working." Don't do fancy flourishes if it will make you late to the next thing. Don't do fancy flourishes if it's going to stress out your beginner partner. And then, of course, everyone deserves a silly little hat, but only after all the other needs are met.

**Mary** That's beautiful. Is that something that you created.

**Maia** Out of the recesses of my brain.

**Mary** So great.

**Maia** So when I'm on the mic, I care more about the dancers being happy and feeling good than the dances necessarily working. And I care more about calling dances that will work for the crowd that I've got than a dance that is super fancy, but might fall apart

because it's above the level of some of the people on the floor, or it will stress them out and compromise emotional safety.

**Mary** And so when you're at the mic, what are some of the things that you do or say to make sure this this pyramid is well put together?

**Maia** A lot of it comes in the programing and picking things that are at the level of the dancers I have in front of me. Picking things that are at the level of the dancers I have in front of me and not the crowd I wish I was calling for. Or there are some callers out there who think that good calling is calling the gnarliest possible dance, or pushing the boundaries of what figures you can do. And I would rather everyone have fun on a simple dance. Let me call The Nice Combination 20 times. I don't care as long as people are having a good time. Where possible, I give little technique and safety tips. So, for example, if you're in a short wave and you're balancing forward and back, I like to remind people that everyone's arms are different lengths and don't dislocate anyone's shoulder because you know how often people kind of forget that that's a thing. So dropping in safety tips where I can.

In the lesson I always teach that the fancy, spinny bits are optional. I like to demo with a do-si-do and show that if I do a normal do-si-do and my partner does a wacky twirly one, that it still works just fine. And you never need to do the funky, fancy bits if you don't feel like it. And just trying to—this is probably a gimme, but don't be annoyed at the dancers over the mic. They're doing their best. And it's it's surprising, but there are some callers who are audibly annoyed at the dancers over the microphone and I...even if sometimes the dancers are doing things that are kind of annoying and you wish they wouldn't, you still just should be kind.

**Mary** Right? As I've said a lot in these interviews, you're the loudest voice in the room. And so, that for sure has a big effect on the group that you're working with.

**Maia** Yeah. And just giving people a chance to succeed. So if you call a dance that's a little bit ropy, maybe you don't get to call your fancy following dance that you programed. You drop back to something easy to let people feel like they're succeeding.

**Mary** It's great. For you in those moments, you know, if you have them, I don't know if you do. But in those moments where you might feel some frustration with the dancers, do you have a way that you navigate what's happening for you and then what's coming out over the mic? Like, what's happening for you personally?

**Maia** Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's a good question. Mostly I don't think I've ever gotten so annoyed at the dancers that I cannot, like, keep my voice even and friendly. The closest I get is when people are just kind of chattering and not listening. But I have a handful of things in my back pocket. I, in fact, wrote a blog post about what to do when the dance hall is just being super chatty. But I have a handful of things. My favorite is that I will ask a question of the end of the hall and be like, "Sorry, I can't hear you. What did you say?" Until they shush everyone else so they can talk verbally to me and then everyone is quiet.

**Mary** Caller jiu-jitsu.

**Maia** Right? Because I've heard callers yell at the hall on the mic to be quiet. And there's no faster way to kill the mood.

**Mary** Right? I mean, some of that is just like managing your own emotions. But then also some of it is just pure function, like it'll make your job more difficult...

**Maia** Yup.

**Mary** ...to put the dancers on edge or or call them out. That's not really what they're there for.

**Maia** And conversely, if you have the goodwill of the hall, they will forgive a lot of stuff. That's how I got through my first couple years of calling out. I was just kind of derping around on stage, but because I was genial and not taking myself too seriously, everyone forgave it for some reason.

**Mary** It's true. I mean, people just want to dance. So as long as you're genuinely trying to help them achieve that goal, there is a lot of leeway. Do you call in different settings with different experience levels? And how do you change up your approach if you're calling for a beginner dance or a one night stand situation?

**Maia** For sure. I, and again, this happens less often now because I am gigging out at the random little events somewhat less. But I've certainly called the odd wedding or event that just has a ton of people who have never done contra before. Or maybe the funkiest mix is a wedding where it's one third dancers and two thirds people who have never done this before have no idea what they're doing—and are probably drunk.

**Mary** The trifecta.

**Maia** I'm calling a dance next weekend because I'm the only caller who isn't NEFFA, and it is the day after 4/20. And I'm a little bit concerned that all the beginners are going to be still, observing, which will make my job a lot harder. We'll see. I'll report back. If you don't hear from me it's because I tried to call a dance where everyone was high and I gave up and left. What were we just talking about?

**Mary** Calling for beginner crowds.

**Maia** Yeah. Building up to early successes is really important, I think. Even just, you can do the swing and on the correct side and retain your roll through the whole dance is a whole thing that experienced dancers take for granted, but it's really a skill that needs to be built if you're brand new to this. So if I genuinely do have a brand spanking new crowd, I will start with just mixers and circle dances and get them used to walking in eight for a couple dances before I even introduce roles and the swing. And then we spend a dance or two just, everything glossary except for the swing. A bunch of long figures where there's a lot of recovery time, and just drilling the roles and how to end up on the correct side of the swing, because that's a prerequisite for any of the even slightly harder dances.

But also, I didn't realize for the longest time until I sat down and looked at it, but you can make a pretty decent program without even including a chain. So you can just kind of program around the moves that are too much trouble to teach and teach a very limited set of moves and use them in interesting ways. I saw Will Mentor do an entire first half of, I think Contra Shock, without a chain. And I was like, "Dang, he's good. I should try that."

**Mary** It's true. And you know, again, a lot of it is just, how are you delivering it? If you're like, "I'm excited about this, let's do this." You know?



**Maia** Yeah, I definitely used to worry that a program like that would be too boring for the experienced dancers in the room, but they're also there for a reason, and they would have a lot less fun if the beginners were struggling and the line was falling apart. So yeah.

**Mary** Do you still dance a lot or are you mostly, if you go to a dance, are you calling?

**Maia** No, I still dance plenty, and in fact, I try to organize my calling schedule around making sure I still have time to dance. My first gig out of the Panini was ESC at Pinewoods and basically I said, "I will take this gig if I can also figure out a session of Pinewoods where I can go to dance, because I miss dancing."

**Mary** Yeah. Oh my gosh. Is "the panini" the Pandemic.

**Maia** The Pandemic. The panini, the panna cotta, the panorama, the personal pan pizza.

**Mary** I love this. I was like, yeah, yeah, what? Oh!

**Maia** We have to laugh or we cry. Sometimes we do both.

**[ [Maia Calls the dance Playground Stomp by Julian Bee with music by Not Enough Fiddles at NEFFA 2017 in Mansfield, MA](#) ]**

## From the dance floor to the mic

**Mary** Yeah. I'm always curious how, once you've been at the mic and that becomes, you know, a significant part of the way that you interact with the contra dance community, has it changed, your experience of dancing?

**Maia** I have so many opinions, Mary. It's terrible. I wish I could trade my opinions.

**Mary** That's what we're here for.

**Maia** Just on the dance floor, I'm like, "I wouldn't have taught that way at all. This dance doesn't actually work. They should take this out of their collection." And I mostly just vent that pressure by mumbling to a friend who is also opinionated, and then it's fine. I just certainly have opinions on everything that happens on a dance floor. And sometimes they're good opinions! Sometimes they're like, "Ooh, I love that teach, I should steal that." And also, to be very clear, like if I have an opinion about your calling, it doesn't mean I think you're a bad caller. I just have opinions on a lot of stuff, but I will have an opinion or two on a caller who I adore, and that does not mean I respect their calling any less.

**Mary** Right. So it's just your caller brain is still very much switched on, even if you're dancing.

**Maia** Sure can't turn it off.

**Mary** Yeah.

**Maia** Or rather when I find it is turned off then I know I'm dancing to someone really stellar because...I don't know. I think part of the skill of being a caller is being able to fade into the background, and that's a thing I am trying to work on in myself, because my instinct is to ham it up and play for laughs. But I think I'm a better caller if I use that for a specific purpose, on purpose, and then otherwise letting it be not about me. I for a bit, carried around a card in my caller's box that said, "Talk less, smile more." So if I'm dancing to someone and I have no particular opinions about their calling. And I don't notice their calling it's because they're doing very well and everyone on the floor is vibing. And that's a lovely experience for me as a dancer, to be able to shut off my caller brain and just dance.

**Mary** Yeah, that really resonates with me. I find it hard to turn off my caller brain and just have that feeling of abandon or just being transported that is where it all started.

**Maia** For sure. Yeah.

**Mary** It feels somewhat elusive these days. I think it's just sort of a fact. Like sometimes I feel sad. Sometimes I'm like, am I jaded? And I'm like, no, I just think this is where the combination of experiences in my life has, has led me to at this moment.

**Maia** It is also really nice to be able to support other people on the floor with my caller brain that doesn't shut up. And like, there's certainly dancers who are not callers who do this as well. But once you understand enough how the dances work, then you can help guide people when they're lost or, you know, put the newcomers at ease. Like, don't worry, you've got this. You know where people are going next. You know how the physics works and you know how to guide people, and that's really cool. That's, I think the next level in development as a dancer for lots of people, I think, is when you're dancing not just with yourself, but with the whole set.

**Mary** Yeah. And that kind of presence on the dance floor—not only, I think, are you supporting the other dancers, but you're supporting whoever is at the mic too. It's always so nice to have those people on the floor. And I will admit...

**Maia** Gosh, they're angels. Yes.

**Mary** Yeah. I think I am not always that person. When I am on the dance floor, I think part of me...it's just like, "School's out for the summer," kind of like, "I'm not in charge."

**Maia** Oh that's very funny.

**Mary** But sometimes I do my best to rein it in. And especially...our dance in Montpelier these days is just getting an amazing amount of of new folks. The balance is really shifted and it's wonderful, it's amazing, and our experienced dancers are, you know, they're working hard. There's a lot to do to kind of hold that crowd and make it still work. But when I do that, I kind of have to know that that's going to be my experience. And that's why I'm going to the dance. You know, it's different than, you know, dancing at camp or trying trying to seek that, that wild abandon. Like, nope, I'm gonna set that aside and this is going to be my, 'helping from the floor' persona.

**Maia** It's a different mode for sure. And if I show up at a challenging contra session and there are some people who are perhaps not ready for a challenging contra session, and they need a bunch of shepherding, that bums me out. But at a regular local dance I really enjoy being able to help that vibe.

**Mary** What else feels good about calling?

**Maia** Calling, a lot like dancing did when I first started, feels like very much a puzzle to solve and a skill to build, and something that can be just constantly honed. Like, I'm never going to be done developing as a caller. It is very nice to know that my autopilot is well enough honed that I can just kind of phone it in if I need to, but I am also excited to keep getting better and keep learning from my experiences and the people around me. And I think it was probably not until like 2018/2019 that I stopped just YOLO-ing through calling and started thinking about it as a skill to build and looking at myself and my strengths and weaknesses, and how I think really critically about how I program and that sort of thing. And that's been very cool to get more into the weeds about it. Starting to blog about various things has helped me crystallize some thoughts on it, which has been pretty cool. And several people even read my blog posts, which feels great.

**Mary** That's wonderful. We're definitely going to link to your blog in the show notes.

**Maia** Okay.

**Mary** But yeah, I love that. Let's maybe dive into some sort of nuts and bolts if you feel like that.

**Maia** Sure.

## Programming dances

**Mary: What** do you think about when you're programming? What's your programming approach?

**Maia** For a local dance with a bunch of beginners I'm thinking about building the difficulty progression and when I introduce various moves. So I've got it fairly formulaic at this point, but first dance is a glossary dance with a chain so that they can learn and practice that. I try to avoid chain-star progressions, so I don't call Baby Rose or Nice Combination as my first dance anymore, because chain-star progressions, turns out, are a lot harder for new folks than experienced dancers assume. Second dance: something fun. Get everyone moving together, no new moves. Third dance: hey introduction if the crowd can handle it. And then I can riff for a little while till the end of the half. If I have a busload of beginners, like someone brings their whole birthday party or something, I stick an even easier dance, probably without a chain at the beginning and bump everything down a slot.

And then I'm aiming for my hardest dances to be maybe right before the half ends or first, second, third in the second half and then after that I'm tapering down. Everyone's getting a little sleepy, going a little bit easier, kind of aiming for the sweet spot of - there's an interesting thing in the dance, but it's not too hard to do. To keep people's interest without taxing their brains all that much. Yeah, and then I used to think, "Oh, I'll end on a no walk through and give the dancers something super cool to wrap their heads around." But these days I will not end on a no walk through because I want the band to be able to jam out, and I want the dancers not to think too hard. I definitely used to think, "Oh, the dance gets harder and harder and harder over the course of the evening." And that's not true because

people get sleepy at a certain point. And that's also something I learned the hard way when calling festivals, you get to Sunday and everyone's zonked out.

**Mary** Do you enjoy when you do have the opportunity to to program more complex material, or calling for experienced dancers?

**Maia** I love it. It's great. And I get a chance to do it less often than I do that local dance, building the difficulty thing. So it's a ton of fun. I have a whole section of my box and I'm always very excited when I get to go into. So I called Beantown Stomp last month and it was a delight. That hall could handle anything I threw with them. If something broke, it was because I taught it wrong, not because they messed up. And so that was a ton of fun. And I got to pull out all of my favorite weird, funky dances, including some of my own that I don't get to call very often because I write gnarly dances sometimes, and they're seldom a good fit for my home dance on a regular day. So it's nice to be able to call this.

**Mary** Yeah! Have you always written dances?

**Maia** Yeah. Way before I knew how to do it I was writing dances. I wrote—this is going to sound very funny. I wrote a lot of dances in church services. I'm a secular Jew, but as a singer, I would do a lot of church gigs when I first graduated college. And I would be sitting up in the choir loft, tuning out the sermon, often intentionally, because they were not always my jam. And so I would write contra dances in the margins of my, sheet music.

**Mary** I love that.

**Maia** They seldom worked, and I also did not know how to check if they'd already been written. The most embarrassing contra dance I ever wrote was...I would also do this in class sometimes in college and I was taking a class on the the chemistry of HIV. And I, for some reason, attempted to write in contra dance form the process of HIV infection.

**Mary** Wow. I just, wow.

**Maia** So bad.

**Mary** Your brain was, you know, synthesizing.

**Maia** My brain was sure doing something. So that dance never saw the light of day.

**Mary** Did it work?

**Maia** It technically progressed, but that's all you could say for it. It's been lost to time. I think that's okay.

**Mary** Yeah. And how did that emerge that you, felt like, I'm ready to go beyond just the dances that I'm finding, like, I want to get in there on the inside of this process.

**Maia** I think it's the same drive that made me want to call. Just like wanting to understand all of the ins and outs. And also often I would find a dance in the wild was like, "Oh, I really like this part, but this part bums me out. So what can I do to make the dance that I would like to dance?"

**Mary** Yeah, when you're calling more challenging material or working with an experienced crowd, are there ways that you still bring in your hierarchy of needs, even if you're working with experienced dancers?

**Maia** Oh, yeah. I love using experienced dances as a chance to impart style tips, because there are going to be people in every crowd who need reminders. Perhaps that such and such a move has potential to torque people's arms. And I think especially if I'm calling a challenging dance for a local community, so like when I call the challenging dance at Brooklyn, for example, a lot of people who come to that are on that kind of intermediate to advanced trajectory so they can do the figures and get through the dance, but they haven't necessarily picked up the little style bits that make the dance extra, extra pleasant, and extra good feeling. That was really English. So for example, like teaching how to catch someone out of a petronella twirl to swing them. Like some of these things people have never been taught, and some people with exceptionally good physical sensibilities pick it up, and some people just kind of do whatever until they're taught something else.

## Leadership and Dance Citizenship

**Mary** Do you see yourself when you're the caller...do you think about leadership? Do you see yourself as a leader and if so where are you leading us?

**Maia** Great question. I think...so yeah, for the course of the evening, certainly I feel very responsible for the vibe of the hall and I am on a team with the organizers for for that night. I mean, I try to always be on the organizers team, but especially when I'm calling, I'm on the organizers team to make the experience be lovely for everyone. Also, when I'm relating to the band, I'm trying to make things as easy for them as possible and give them as much of a heads up about any weird shenanigans I'm planning as I can. Just trying to keep everything very smooth for everyone involved. I don't know if that answers your question. That's a fascinating question, and I'm trying to wrap my head around it.

**Mary** Yeah, and it's a total exploratory question and one of my somewhat abstract interests. It's just, calling is such a weird job. You know, it's such a weird role. And, yeah, there's being the caller over the course of an evening. There's being a caller in your local dance community where maybe you're contributing or are influencing the group over a long period of time. There's calling at a weekend, which is a super focused little microcosm, experimental community for like, three days, you know. And there's your time on the mic and off the mic. And maybe just because I have a lot of personal angst about who I am across all those different settings and situations, I'm curious how other people might experience it. And I think some people are like, what are you talking about, Mary? And then some people have thoughts. So...

**Maia** Oh yeah, that's wild. I feel a huge sense of responsibility to the communities I'm calling in if they're my home community or a weekend.

**Mary** I think part of it too is wondering, I guess, do you have thoughts or feelings about the future of our contra dance community and ways that you in your caller role feel like you can contribute to or guide contra dancing into a future.

**Maia** Yeah. Oh, man. So from the 'dances I call' perspective there's definitely stuff there, like I want left hand chains and right hand chains for both roles to be less weird, scary, esoteric moves and more things you can just do and not freak out about because it opens up a ton of choreographic possibilities. So from that angle, just calling more of the dances with the moves I wish I saw, and calling fewer of the dances with the moves I wish didn't happen as much. So like I mentioned, I don't call shadow swings basically at all anymore. And I've more or less dropped butterfly whirls because a lot of people I've spoken to have said, oh, they feel very sweaty and funky in a dance weekend context when everyone is kind of icky from dancing all weekend. I wonder if there's a way to save that, because I do enjoy that move, but that's maybe a later project.

In terms of the culture we build and the community we build, that's a lot less straightforward and maybe a lot more important. A thing I think a lot about is the transition from intermediate dancer to advanced dancer. And for a lot of people, their skill trajectory goes like, learn how to do the moves. Learn how they all fit together you can understand what's being called to you and get through the dance. Some people kind of stop there and don't really learn how to share weight, for example, or really internalize where their body and their partner's body are in space. I don't know how you teach that, especially when it's one person on a microphone in a whole room of people and not a one-on-one thing.

But I think you need to do more, not like every individual, but as a whole the majority of the people on the floor need to know more than just how move A connects to move B to make the dance fun and enjoyable. You need some amount of technique and connection and weight sharing and awareness of your body in space. Some people hit that milestone and then learn all of the fancy flourishes and flashy things. But if you stop there then you're kind of doing your own flashiness, potentially at the expense of the rest of the line and the rest of the floor. I tend to think that the the best dancers are the ones who got through their flashy phase and went the all the way around the other side, and now appreciate unflashy dances. Like, you can still do the flashy stuff, I mean, tons of flourishes and it's enjoyable. But I also really appreciate just the connection of a very simple dance. I appreciate the act of leading a beginner through the dance and not needing to do anything flashy impressive with them. And so how do we instill those values in a whole community of people when the flashy stuff is inherently more exciting because it is hip and cool and showy.

**Mary** Right? Yeah, that's a really articulate vision for thinking about advanced dancers and what that means, and also having dancers like that in the community and what they can contribute towards the sustainability of the community if they're able to. And it's so tricky too, right? Because it also just has to do with personal enjoyment and how people like to dance and how much can you teach people or invite people into this sort of consciousness of including a care for others and for the whole group as part of how they dance. It's like, I think some of that is just just who people are.

**Maia** Right, and I don't want to go up to anyone and tell them they're doing it wrong. And like, unless their actions are actually putting someone in danger, which I certainly have gone up to the odd person and been like, "Hey, after you spun my partner, who was clearly brand new, she was pretty disoriented. Please don't do that."

**Mary** Yeah, some things are clear.

**Maia** And sometimes I get pushback on that, which I find shocking.

**Mary** That's hard. Yeah, that's really hard. Do you have thoughts or tactics of those sticky situations of observing behavior that feels like it's not contributing to the overall good of the group, or just is potentially harmful, on an individual basis—how do you handle that as a caller?

**Maia** Jeez. Yeah. So I mean, on the floor, very occasionally I will go up to someone and say something when it's a very clear cut case of like, "I've seen you flourish a bunch of people on the floor with less than responsibly. This person was clearly disoriented afterwards." It's kind of trickier when the relative newcomer being spun around seems to be having a good time and seems to be fine and is maybe just a little out of it. I'm like, I'm not really licensed to make that call of like, "Oh, you shouldn't be doing that." I personally have a pretty strict threshold for when I start adding flourishes and fancy stuff for someone who's new. But from the mic if I notice it getting egregious, I will mention from the mic how to decline a flourish. I would rather be teaching the aggressive flourishers to not, but it's a bandaid to just make sure that anyone who does not want to be spun can say no. But also teaching people how to decline a flourish doesn't necessarily guarantee that the person trying to spin them will hear or head that, which is rough.

**Mary** Yeah.

**Maia** So that's why I'm so excited about teaching dance-citizenship flavored workshops.

**Mary** Oh, I love that—dance citizenship.

**Maia** It sounds a little dull and boring to all but a small subset of people, so we usually come up with a more exciting name, but that's at its core, 60% or more of the workshops that I teach.

**Mary** Oh, wow. It's funny yeah, that sounds so exciting to me.

**Maia** But, respectfully, you're already a little bit of a nerd about this.

## Dance role terms

**Mary** Good to know your audience. Exactly. But it's so true. Dance citizenship, I think, as our community grows, as new generations of dancers come in, as older generations continue to dance, as all these generations mix together. You know, the idea of what is good dance citizenship? Like any social scene, the norms are changing and evolving. We haven't talked directly about role terms in calling yet. What's your approach to that?

**Maia** Oh, boy.

**Mary** It's a hot topic.

**Maia** It's hot, yeah. So I am a larks and robins stand. I have used a handful of different terms over the years, especially during that period where everyone and their mother was trying out their own set of gender neutral terms. I do not like calling gents and ladies because I find the gender baggage with them pretty tough to ignore. And if you are coming into a gents and ladies dance with the idea that anyone can dance any role and they are just old timey names for roles, then I think that makes it better. But there's still kind of an

assumption that if I, who am obviously a woman, am dancing on the left, you're like, "Oh, you're the "gent," are you sure?" And getting that kind of double take, and second guess when I dance on the left got really old, really fast.

I will say that I think in a perfect world, gent and lady could be gender neutral terms. I've taught a lesson where I gave that same disclaimer and I said, "Oh, these are just old timey role names. They don't actually correlate to gender. As long as, you know if you move or don't move when I say 'gents do this,' you're fine." And then my lesson was, sort themselves into roles pretty arbitrarily, not along terribly gendered lines as far as I could see. And I was like, "This is so cool. Look at that, we gender neutral-ified these terms even though they're traditionally gendered. And then the experienced dancers entered the hall and immediately grabbed all of my beginners into gendered pairs. So the role names are somewhat less important in my mind than the culture on the floor and how gendered that culture is. But also in the annoying, cyclical way I think part of the way to chip away at gendered assumptions on the floor is to take the gender out of the terms, which in turn lets there be a little bit more flexibility in terms of how people think of who should dance what role.

**Mary** Yeah, I think a lot about just what you just exemplified of, you can take a group of beginners, brand new beginners and teach in such a way that that brings into practice the experience of roles and the language connected to them that you want to see. And then there's this space between bringing people into this new paradigm, and then how does it interact with a whole mix of paradigms that might also exist in your dance community. And we're all sort of trying to navigate it together. How do you traverse that space?

**Maia** Oh lord.

**Mary** Not that I'm asking you to have a particular answer, but you know it's a really tough one. I hear from people who struggle with the new role terms and I don't want to dismiss their experience. And I, like you, have a strong preference for calling larks and robins and for creating a space in which anyone can dance any role in an assumption free space.

**Maia** Yeah, it's hard because in the role terms debate, a lot of things get conflated, I think. Like there's the question of what role term should we use, and there's the question of should anyone be able to dance any role? And what would this community look like if it were entirely not gendered in regards to who dances with who and who dances on what side. And I find a lot of people who are...and it kind of runs the gamut of like, there are plenty of people who are not down with larks and robins, and some of them it's genuinely - "I have a very hard time adjusting to this new set of terms." But some of the complaints about the terms, my sense is that they're actually more complaints about the idea of degendering the dance, and that that is a good thing. Because for some people, taking away that norm is pretty destabilizing. And I don't want to discount that, but also, I'm so glad we're moving away from the time when two women would dance together, and two men who were out on the sideline would come split them up because the men wanted to dance with women and felt they deserved it—that they that they deserved their choice of partner more than these two women did. That to me has always been an extremely icky vibe.

**Mary** Right. Or men sitting out on the side because of the, quote unquote gender imbalance—that they have no one to dance with.



**Maia** Right. And I, much like women wearing pants was a lot more acceptable, a lot sooner than it was remotely acceptable for men to wear skirts. I think it's a lot more acceptable in some of these communities for women to dance on the left than it is for men to dance on the right. And I, cards on the table, I'm a lesbian, which has both something to do with my preferred place to dance, and not actually that much because dance is not actually just a meat market, turns out.

**Mary** No!

**Maia** And when men say like, "I want to dance with women because I'm attracted to women," first of all, me dancing on the left has no bearing with whether you, individual person, can dance with women. Simply ask women to dance if you want, I guess. But also, "I want to dance with women because I'm attracted to them," like, are you attracted to every one of your dance partners? Even that person who's 30 years older than you? Even that girl who's in high school? That is a very strange way of thinking of it, to my mind. I dance with plenty of people I'm not attracted to, women and men both. But I mention my sexuality just because it's a shortcut to, if I want to dance with my girlfriend and some dudes think that them wanting to dance with a woman is more important than us wanting to dance together, that's a gross feeling.

And that, thankfully, has not happened in a decade to me, which is great. In some spaces I have a hard enough time dancing on the left, and that's the the more accepted version of gender transgression. So I can only imagine what it's like for men who prefer to dance on the right in these situations and I've heard so many stories of two men encountering each other in line, and one of them refuses to do the close swing, and that to me sends a very clear message of, "I don't want to have encountered you here, you shouldn't be dancing on this side." And that hurts me, on behalf of those folks.

**Mary** Yeah. And I guess it's the question of, you know, I think a lot of people think about changing to gender free terminology as a way to create a safer, more comfortable space for newcomers. It's for people who feel uncomfortable in gendered spaces. I also hear that what is making some people feel more comfortable is making other people less comfortable.

**Maia** Yeah.

**Mary** And, you know, I think probably the most important thing is for there to be space for communication and conversation around this process, and to be viewing it as a process. You know, I think that the dance communities who have successfully navigated changing the convention of terminology used at their dance, I think the processes where that's been the most successful have been communities who created space for a lot of dialog.

**Maia** And also, it's so cool that this conversation is even hitting the mainstream. Because for the longest time it was just like, you had the queer dances, and then you had the quote unquote, normal dances that called gents and ladies. And those queer dances did so much work and trailblazing in this. And I think they don't get talked about enough. It's so cool that they existed and made all the strides that they did.

**Mary** Absolutely.

**Maia** And also, God bless, Chris Ricciotti, who did a lot of this work, decades ago and I believe pioneered the use of the "bands" and "bare arms."

**Mary** Right, yeah. Chris has been on this podcast!

**Maia** Oh, very good. So I don't I don't need to tell his whole story on his behalf because he's already told it.

**Mary** Yeah. Yeah. It's a wonderful interview.

**Maia** Amazing. Well, because he's been so gracious in having his terms, replaced basically. Where a lot of people could have gotten really defensive and clung onto that he's like, "No, you're right. This is fine. Let's do this!" And that's very impressive. And I appreciate that in addition to all the other stuff he's done for this, this seed and this movement.

**Mary** Yeah. And then I think there's the fact that this...I love thinking of discussions about role terminology moving out of queer dance spaces to mainstream or—first of all, just even thinking of mainstream contra dance spaces is slightly amusing—but I know what you're saying.

**Maia** Sure, yeah.

**Mary** You know, but then also the discussion of gender and the gender binary and gendered terminology, it's very much in the larger mainstream, you know, obviously outside of contra dancing, and so I also feel really grateful to have a community space where we're working on some of these big questions in a really interesting way.

**Maia** It's very funny to me that a space where regularly, you see big burly men wearing skirts, that this was such a contentious discussion, even in those spaces, is fascinating to me. Yeah, but I'm glad we're having it. I also think that a very niche thing that delights me is that for the longest time, all of the women and, you know, people read as women I knew who were really excellent leads were, were queer women. And I know I certainly learned to lead and learn to get fancy at it so that I could flirt with girls—I'm not going to lie about that. But it brings me a very specific joy to see straight women getting really good at dancing lead. You're not doing it with any agenda. You're just doing it because you like to. And that's so cool and I'm so glad there's space for that.

**Mary** Me too. Absolutely. And I have those moments where I look out on the dance floor and, especially when I've gotten to do a beginners workshop, when I can see that there's a few people who just came into it brand new and so I tried to sort of lay out how this works, that anybody can dance any role. That it just means this is where you end the swing or if I say this word that means you, and then seeing everyone working together and experiencing that. New people being brought in, experienced people helping them along. It does feel super positive when it all comes together like that, which is not always, you know, but it can be just like a little glimpse of something, really promising.

**Maia** Yeah. Talking about the trajectory of dancer development and skill building that I was talking about earlier, I think one path, although not a necessary one is, once you've gotten really proficient dancing on one side, why don't you get really proficient at dancing on the other side, too. A whole nother realm of skills you can build this how to swap in the middle of a dance. And because I'm me, I will say, "Swap in the middle of the dance without messing up the rest of the dancers. And by making sure all the other dancers know that you are in fact, supposed to be in the spot you're standing in." But it's just another way you

can enjoy this dance form, another skill in your toolbox to help new folks, because you can dance on either side. It doesn't have to be a goal for everyone by any means, but I think it's very cool to have on the table as an option.

**[ [Maia Calls A Dance for Dan by Bill Olson with music by Callithump \(David Knight \(fiddle\), Andrew Marcus \(accordion\), Paul Oorts \(guitar\)\) at the Silver Spring, MD monthly contra dance in March, 2015.](#) ]**

**Maia** I started a conversation on Shared Weight and I said: "For those of you who call gender free, how do you get beginners into one role or the other during your lesson? Do you simply assign it that you have them try to swing from both sides and then decide? Do you have them pick based on what bird they like better?" And then at the bottom I said, "Please, let's not relitigate the bird terms. This is a question for those who use the bird terms. If you don't like them, don't worry about it." And of course, we started relitigating it and I was surprised, but maybe not too surprised at how much of the opposition was coming from men who did not want to meet other men in line with them. I get the feeling that they would have been fine with me dancing on the left, but stressed out about a man dancing on the right if it meant that they dancing on the left had to encounter this other person in line. And that's kind of sad.

You're allowed to have your preferences but I would hope that you take some time to think about where they're coming from. And it's hard. I don't want to override any individual's sense of what feels comfortable, but what if your sense of what feels comfortable is coming from decades of weird societal conditioning that says men shouldn't be allowed to touch. Or I see dancers out there who are hesitant to ask larger folks to dance because of their preconceived notions of what it's going to be like to dance with a fat person. Or like, oh, what if they can't hold their own weight? I never want to force anyone to dance with someone they don't want to dance with, but at the same time, there are more and less legitimate reasons for not wanting to dance with someone, and I think it's important to examine those.

**Mary** I think that's really, really well said. And, you know, hopefully I think that's something that the future of contra dancing maybe can offer is...one one hope I have is that contra dancing is already, I think, and can continue to be and can grow as a space where all of us can be invited to have a space where we try to unpack and let go and step outside of some of the more harmful societal norms that are out there. That's a lot to ask of someone and I think it can't always happen immediately on the dance floor. But there's so many other potential factors to support someone and maybe stepping outside of a comfort zone, maybe seeing that they can shed a preconception..

Because we also have music and movement and facilitated interaction and, you know, maybe some of those other factors can take the pressure off. I think contra dancing can be a playful space. There can be some lightness that maybe can allow someone to take a brave step. But, it's a process.

**Maia** Yeah, and like, also to be clear, I do definitely really appreciate the people who are doing the work and like stepping outside their comfort zones and letting themselves try a new thing, or relating to the dance roles in a way they hadn't before. I don't want the whole conversation to just be me yelling at people who don't like the bird terms, right? There's a

whole in between space and there are people at all points on it and it's pretty cool that they are.

**Mary** Yeah, absolutely. Maia, just so for anyone who hasn't had the pleasure of meeting you or dancing with you, would you...how do you think of your cohort?

**Maia** My cohort? Millennial queers and friends of the queers. Is that an accurate descriptor?

**Mary** If it is for you.

**Maia** Yeah, the New York and New England millennial, gender free dancing switch kind of crowd. Yeah.

**Mary** Which is, you know, one of the groups in our multi-generational, multi-faceted dance community. I mean, when I started envisioning this podcast, I was kind of like, "Oh, I want to sort of be creating a snapshot of dance callers at this moment because this is when I am alive and doing this. But it was like, "Oh, do we do it chronologically? Do we do it...and you know, I wanted it to be kind of very, very cross sectional, I guess. But I think it's important to sometimes say, "Oh, here's this camp that we're hearing from today. And, you know, not that you are representing an entire group. You are you.

**Maia** All views and opinions expressed are purely my own. Etc., etc..

**Mary** Exactly.

**Maia** But honestly, contra's one of the spaces of my life where I do get to meet the most people outside of this cohort, certainly age wise. In other places in my life, I'm interacting with folks in their 20s and 30s, and it's very cool to be around such a truly intergenerational community. And also it's the space where I've had the most contact with queer elders, I think, which is important and I do see a lot of friction between generations of the queer community. Which is fascinating and sad. Definitely as different flavors of relating to gender have risen in social consciousness...I've definitely heard from my generation like, "Oh, the older gay people don't use my pronouns right." And there's a lot of friction there and just generational shifts that caused tension. So I think it's very cool to have spaces where multiple generations of the queer community can come together and just hang out and learn from each other. So, consider this a plug for any of the LCFD [Lavender County Folk Dancers] events, because they're delightful. And I'm calling the the June camp at Pinewood. So if anyone wants to go.

**Mary** Wonderful. Lavender County Folk and Country dancers?

**Maia** Something like that.

**Mary** Something like that: LCFD. So great, well, I have three questions I usually close with, but is there anything in our wide ranging conversation that we missed or that you really wanted to touch on?

**Maia** This is neither here nor there but when you were talking about why it's important for you as a caller to know both roles so you can see how a dance works from either side. It occurred to me that when I am walking a dance in my head I invariably walk it as the robin, and I have to remind myself to walk it as the lark, which is funny for me because I dance

more lark than robin these days. Probably like 70/30. And so it's fascinating and so deeply embedded in my head that...because for a while I was dancing almost exclusively on the right, and it's just wild the way that sticks. Is that the case for you?

**Mary** That's 100% the case for me. I'm always robin number one if I pick up any dance and I start going through it in my head.

**Maia** I'm in fact robin number one in the CDNY dance hall.

**Mary** Oh, I love that.

**Maia** And like, I can walk it in other roles and in other places, but I need to remind myself to.

**Mary** Yeah, yeah. And then I mean, I do have a pretty regular practice if I'm trying to really figure out how to teach a dance I want to be able to say with confidence where everybody's going to be.

**Maia** Yeah.

**Mary** Where are their points of connection and orientation...and it's really, the best thing is to be able to know it from both roles.

**Maia** So, I also have one, I'm gathering data. I have a question for you if that's allowed?

**Mary** Please.

**Maia** How do you decide how long to run a dance? And in the moment, how do you decide when to stop it?

**Mary** I'm just like the least systematic person. I don't think I have a honed system. It's very intuitive. I couldn't for the life of me tell you like a number of times. If I'm paying enough attention, you know, I try to take note of the first couple in line in one of the lines and make sort of a rough guess based on the length of the line if it's feels like...you know here I'm picturing the Montpelier hall. If I have a full line in Montpelier, which is probably like 8 to 10 hands four and I might run people down to the bottom and maybe a few times back. So sometimes I'm doing those kinds of calculations—watching a couple go down.

Sometimes I'm keeping an eye on the time. Usually if it's a regular contra dance, I'm thinking in 15 minute blocks, like walk through...start of the next walk through. So if I had started the walkthrough at 8:15 and maybe the dance gets going at like 8:19 or 20, you know, I might kind of be thinking "Oh, I'm getting towards the end of my this 15 minute block." Not that I'm always on that schedule.

**Maia** Right, right.

**Mary** But yeah, it's often just a feel. The other thing I might be a little clued into is like the band. If I remember, I try to ask how many tunes they're playing.

**Maia** Yeah.

**Mary** If it's a band that plays a lot of three tune sets, then often that that gives me a little clue. But I always say in my pre- starting the dance conversation with the band. I always make a point of saying "I sometimes am checked out. If it's ever going too long, give me the look, please feel free. And if I ever give you three more and you're like, "Wait!" Then that's fine too because I have probably lost track of things. I'm very, very imprecise, I would say. But sometimes it's back to that weird, sympathetic feeling that, you know, is maybe totally in my head, but sometimes I can just kind of feel like it's time. Like it's been going on. It's a very long winded answer.

**Maia** Yeah. No that's great, I love that. First of all, I find it so funny and like, makes perfect sense to me that you're clocking this by the Montpelier dance hall. Like, in this conversation, I'm realizing how much I use the CDNY hall and the Brooklyn hall as reference points for for the stuff that I do. That makes a lot of sense. I think I'm a minority, I actually count times through, and I've told a couple people this and they're like, you're a sociopath.

**Mary** Like, I always have just wished that I did that. There's something that just seems so comforting because at least you have some, hard data. I'm just like, arruuugg? Just feeling my way along.

**Maia** It's like, I know a lot of people who use timers, and it's come up because I've been...there's some new callers up and coming in the scene. And I will say, "Do you need help knowing when to go out?" Because that's the thing a lot of beginning callers, if you can only focus on like two of the five things, when to cue the bad out is not always in the in the top two. And so you might ask for help with that, which is super reasonable. And I'm like, "Oh, no big deal. You just wait until ten times three," and then they're like, what?

**Mary** Which is, do you have a number? Is it usually 10?

**Maia** 13 to 15 is a normal dance length. If I'm at a festival I'll do 15 to 17. If it's the glossary dance I'm kind of rushing through to get to the more interesting stuff, and there are a lot of people out, I might do 11.

**Mary** Yeah. That sounds like totally in the same ballpark of what I think I do, but I have no idea.

**Maia** Right, right, right.

## Closing

**Mary** Oh, I love it. Okay. So to wrap it up, you've already hinted at this, so it's very exciting. But one thing that I appreciate about callers is a lot of us take on a sort of record keeping, cataloging consciousness. Some of it is by necessity, you need to have a way to collect and organize your dances. But I love hearing how everybody approaches that task because there's lots of different ways. So how do you notate and organize your dances?

**Maia** Oh, that's such a good question. My dances; my dance collection I keep digitally. This is going to be...it's a little extra because I work in tech, and I'm also just a little extra in all things I do. I have a big Google spreadsheet where I keep all my dances, and I mail merge them into a Google doc, and then I can print on index cards from the Google Doc.

**Mary** That is incredible.

**Maia** As I say, a little extra.

**Mary** So you do have printed, physical cards?

**Maia** Yeah. And I organize my dances. When I call, I program all physical cards. It's great to be able to keep something in my pocket or stick a maybe dance in upside down so I know it's a maybe or something like that. So I really value having the physical cards. And in my box they are organized, they are color coded by approximate difficulty and then organized spatially in the box by features of the dance. So I have broad categories. I think they are stompy, smooth, mixed, or miscellaneous. And then I've got a section for groovy or marchy, which is down the halls and wavy lines in the middle. A section for travel or leaving the minor set, interacting with your shadow, that sort of thing. A section for glossary dances and a, 'these are really gnarly and don't belong in any other category' section. So I know if it's later in the evening and I want something to get the energy back up and I don't want it to be too tricky I go in the stompy section and I look for a green or a blue card, for example.

**Mary** Amazing. So you also mentioned that you keep a journal, which also includes your programs. And so is that where you record things about what you've called? I know some people write on the back of their cards, but it sounds like you've got a whole kind of log system.

**Maia** Yeah, I keep wondering if I should jot down on the backs of cards how many times or where I call the dance, but I reprint my cards every now and again when they get ratty or like some number of cards in my box, still have some ladies on them. So I can often just translate on the fly in my head and I don't need to reprint them. But if that card gets a little tattered, I'm like, I might as well reprint this with Larks and Robins now. So I keep that record in the in the big Google doc of my dance journal and every now and again when I need a brainless data entry task, I will put those things into the spreadsheet where I can, if I ever got around to it, could be like, how many times have I ended a dance with Mary Cay's Reel? Or really, what is more likely is I hand them to Harris and I'm like, "Harris, how many times have I ended a dance with Mary Cay's Reel, make me a pretty graph because I can't. Thanks Harris.

**Mary** Thanks, Harris. Do some of those graphs exist and could we could we look at them?

**Maia** Well, they don't exist yet.

**Mary** Okay. Harris.

**Maia** Harris. This is, I've never guilt tripped someone through a podcast before. This is new for me.

**Mary** I have no idea if Harris listens to this podcast, but if you do!

**Maia** I'll send him this episode.

**Mary** Do you have any pre or post gig rituals? Things you do to get ready or wind down?

**Maia** Not really. I've never had a particular stage fright or anything like that. And in particular with contra, at this point it feels kind of like old hat, so I don't have any particular psych up rituals. I do try to program before I get on stage. I can wing it, but it works better if I program. Afterwards, I like to go out of the bar, debrief with a buddy. And at some point writing down the program in my journal and noting, "Oh, I taught this dance this way, but I should have done this other thing." It helped me feel like I've tied it up with a bow and gotten all the thoughts bouncing around in my head onto paper, and that means I can stop, you know, beating myself up for teaching this one thing wrong or something, because it's in my journal that I have internalized the lesson.

**Mary** Nice. I hope that that journal makes it into an archive sometime.

**Maia** Oh, god.

**Mary** It's so good!

**Maia** You get to see all the stupid programming choices I made when I was 20. Oh, no.

**Mary** We all start somewhere.

**Maia** Yeah, I guess you're right.

**Mary** Thankfully, I don't save my programs, so I don't have to look at that.

**Maia** Yeah, well.

**Mary** Okay. Lastly, because I'm interested in how people who are callers relate to groups of people, or just people in general. If, you know, are you an introvert or an extrovert?

**Maia** I'm an extrovert. There was a, like, a hot second when I was in college, when everyone was getting back into Myers-Briggs and I said, "Oh, I'm such an artsy, misunderstood introvert. I have a sensitive, poetic soul and I'm a misunderstood introvert." And all my friends were like, Maia. Maia, no. Yeah, I love attention. I love being in big groups. Definitely have needed more recharge time since the the panna cotta, as it were, but, ultimately an extrovert.

**Mary** And do you think that that comfort with groups of people or crowds, you know, do you think that contributed to you becoming a caller or being drawn to to that role?

**Maia** Sure. Yeah, I mean, I think it's the same instinct that makes me like conducting is that I'm comfortable being the center of attention, but in service of the group and not actually making it about myself is always my goal. But also, I think it's very useful as a caller to have a robust ego, so that you don't get too down on yourself when you mess up. But also, I will very frequently take the fall for anything going weird in the dance. And I'm happy to have a laugh or have the hall have a laugh at my expense if it makes everyone else feel more comfortable. So that's a skill I'm grateful to have in my toolbox because I'm good at making fun of myself, sometimes even for good reasons.

**Mary** It certainly gives everyone else a pass, when it can just sort of feel like, "ehhhh."

**Maia** Yeah, absolutely.



**Mary** Well, Maia, thanks so much. It's been really fun to chat about all the things!

**Maia** Yeah, this was a delight. Thank you for nerding out with me.

**Mary** And we will share some links to your blog and some of your dances. And Harris when that graph is done, just send it along.

**Maia** Amazing. Thanks.

**Mary** Thanks, Maia.

## Thank yous

Thanks so much to Maia for talking with me! You can check out the show notes for today's episode at [cdss.org/podcasts](https://cdss.org/podcasts). You'll find links to Maia's website and blog and also a lovely illustration of her "Dancer Hierarchy of Needs" schematic. Check it out at [cdss.org/podcasts](https://cdss.org/podcasts).

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Happy dancing!

**Ben Williams** The views expressed in this podcast are of the individuals and do not necessarily reflect those of CDSS