

FTM Episode 26 - George Marshall

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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.

Hi From the Mic friends. I am delighted to welcome you to this episode with a very special guest, the one and only George Marshall. George discovered square and contra dancing in the early seventies while volunteering with a summer trail crew in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. He quickly became an enthusiastic dancer, eagerly seeking out dance opportunities wherever he could find them. During his college years in Amherst, Massachusetts, George founded the contra-dance band Swallowtail with fellow students, marking the beginning of his journey as a caller and musician. Today, George is a full-time musician, caller, and dance teacher, touring nationally with the band Wild Asparagus. He also collaborates with other bands, including Engine Room, Gaslight Tinkers, River Road, and Joyride.

George is renowned for his expertise in teaching and calling New England-style contra dances, which he has collected from across the country. He is praised for his ability to match music with dance and for his clear and engaging teaching style. As a talented musician, George plays the concertina and bodhrán, and has recorded on eight albums. He also teaches a variety of couples dances, including Lindy/swing, Scandinavian, Cajun, and Zydeco.

Beyond performing and teaching, George is a producer of music and dance events, including week-long dance vacations in the Caribbean and Hawaii.

Here's George!

George Intro

Mary Hello, George Marshall, welcome to From the Mic.

George: Well, hello, Mary Wesley. Thank you very much.

Mary It is wonderful to see you and hear you. And I'm so excited for our conversation today.

George Me too. It's not very often I get to talk about my calling hat, as it were.

Mary Yes, that is what we're here for, absolutely. You have a long and storied resumé in the contra dance world, as a musician, a caller, organizer, chef. You know, I've crossed paths with you in many different ways over the years. But it's really fun, You know, callers often like to sit down and nerd out a little bit. So I'm looking forward to that today.

George Me too.

Mary Well, as I often do, I'd love to just start with an introduction from you and maybe hearing a little bit about how you found your way into the world of traditional music and contra dancing. And through that, how you found your way to the caller's mic?

George Well, when I was growing up, I grew up outside of Boston, there wasn't much dancing in my life. My parents didn't really dance much and they were into classical music. About as racy as it got was a Tom Lehrer album that we kind of wore out of his parodies and songs. But, I really loved hiking and being in the outdoors and so when I was in high school I ended up applying and getting a summer job for the Appalachian Mountain Club in the White Mountains, doing trail crew. And so what would happen is that we would be in the woods, usually starting on Friday morning, and then we'd come back out on Tuesday. And so our weekend was Wednesday and Thursday and the reason for that, of course, was that the Appalachian Mountain Club wanted visibility of the trail crews, of people fixing the trail so that they could solicit donations. And, you know, when you're hiking along and you come across a bunch of people wielding crowbars and moving rocks and hardening areas or building bridging and that sort of thing, then you're more likely to say, "Wow, well, I really want to support this, cause this is great." And it was great.

And, so we were in the woods over the weekends and our Sunday night, which was Thursday, there was a dance about an hour drive away in Strafford in the Field, which was an old inn. And I got asked, "Do you want to go to a dance?" Now my peers were mostly college students because it was a college student program, except I had a big beard at that point and I looked like I was about 30. And so as a 15 year old I went and even by then I had learned that saying yes was more fun than saying no. So even though I didn't really have much faith in anything called dancing...although I have to say, in the fifth grade we were exposed to square dancing in our visit program and I was one of the people that really loved it. So maybe there was some dancing in my life before that! At any rate, I went to the dance and there were about 15 of us in a ten person van with no seats, kind of stacked up like cordwood, just sitting in the back and going over hill and dale. And we got to the dance and there was a beautiful old barn with lights spilling out of it and music and people dancing around and having fun. And we were like, "Oh, this is good. This is what we came for."

And, and so we started dancing and after the first dance, the music stopped and a couple of people...a group said, "Well, you know, I think that there's a caller that's telling us what to do." And, some of the locals came up and said, "You want a partner?" And so we started dancing with partners and in sets. And it was probably better not to have the 15 people just running through the sets, kind of dancing wildly—although we do see that happen, even now! And so when I went back home, I was like, I really would like to find some more dancing. And it turns out there was a lot of dancing in Boston. And so by the time I graduated high school I was probably dancing 5 or 6 nights a week and really enjoying it. And I went to one dance in Cambridge and I remember seeing somebody play a concertina, and I was so struck by it that I went up and I said, "What is that? Where did you get it? And how did you learn to play it?" And so he, after he recovered he gave me the address of a place that sold concertinas, introductory instruments, and I ordered one. And it took, you know, many months for it to get to me. At that time, by the time it got to me I was in college and I remember going to the post office and finding it and bringing it up to my room and locking the door and just spending a few hours with it and then coming out with a tune, going like, okay, I can do this. I had played brass instruments when I was in grammar school, in high school. But when I was in college I really wanted to switch over to playing traditional music and so I focused on that. And, I was really missing dancing

because at that point there was really only one, maybe two dances a month that was within walking distance of where I was going to school. I didn't have a car.

Mary And where was that?

George That was in Amherst, Massachusetts. And so I was sitting in my dorm and looking out the window, kind of going, I'm really missing dancing. And I heard some dance music. So I ran downstairs and across two quads, and I found this guy playing accordion and, I said, "You're playing contra dance music!" And he said, "I am indeed." And I said, "Well, you're going to have a band and I'm going to be in it." And he was like...

Mary Wow!

George "So, what do you play?" I said, "Well, I play penny whistle, but I just got a concertina. And, I'd love to do more." So his name was Chris Keevil, and he was from, I believe, Lincoln, Massachusetts and he played bassoon in the local five college orchestra. And so he had a lot of friends that were musicians and between the five college orchestra and people that were interested, we ended up having a kind of a mass band, a large, I don't know, 15 person band, something like that, and played together. And Chris also knew how to call in addition to playing and being a bandleader. And so we started doing dances for groups on campus at the different schools and it was really pretty fun. And we ended up, after Chris graduated, we ended up keeping...continuing the band and eventually kind of got down to a smaller size of about 6 or 8 people, I guess.

Actually, that happened while I was away, because I went to school for about a year and a half and decided I would take some time off. So one of my bandmates' girlfriends had a truck that she wanted driven from Amherst to Olympia, Washington. It was a Christmas break and so I proceeded to get...it was a really huge snowstorm, it was one of the biggest ones that had been recorded and I had a wicked flu, and I was sick as a dog for a week. But the person who owned the truck kept calling me and saying, "I really would like my truck out here. When can you do it?" And I said, "Well, I'm really sick, but as soon as I recover, I will drive across." So a couple days after I hadn't had a fever for a while, I drove her truck. And since I did feel a sense of urgency, I did the trip in five days as a solo driver and ended up in Olympia, Washington. And she was very kind. She had a chicken shed that wasn't being used by chickens and so I ended up staying in that. And there was a local music scene and there was a little bit of dancing, but I discovered that Seattle had a lot of dancing and a lot of music.

And so I ended up moving up to Seattle and my regular dance was a Thursday night dance at a place called the G Note up in Ballard. And it was a great scene. It was being hosted by local band and local callers so Sandy Bradley was kind of coordinating the callers. The band was, I think it was called The Tall Boys. And they were all quite a bit over six feet and Warren...Warren Argo coordinated the band and I...after a bit going for a few weeks... Oh, so there was a small problem in that I was 18 and the drinking age was 21 and it was held in a tavern, but I didn't drink, and so I thought it was probably okay for me to be there. And since I had my beard that made me look like I was 30, I never got carded and I never drank any alcohol. But I did come in and dance. And I asked Sandy if they ever did any contra dancing. She said, "Oh, sure. We did try it, but it didn't really catch on. Would you like to call a dance?"

And I thought, well, okay, here's that "yes" thing again. "Sure, yes, I'll do that." And so I went outside and I called my friend Christie, and I said, "I need a dance." And he gave me

a dance over the phone. So I went back in and called it, and I don't remember much about how it went, but I do remember that they said, "Well, that was fun. Why don't you come and do it again next week?" And so I went back outside and asked Christie for several dances. And then proceeded to call occasionally, not every week, and certainly not more than one dance. But, there were a bunch of New England transplants, people that wanted to have some contra dancing, and some of them were getting married. And because I was from the East Coast and I called contras I became considered to be an expert on the dance, even though I really wasn't. But still, we could pull it off. And, my friend Sherry Nevins, who is an excellent caller and dance organizer, called for a lot of weddings with her band, Flash in the Pan String Band. And she is very supportive of other people calling and so she wanted to get me involved.

And so when they had a gig that wanted to have a contra dance program, she would contact me. And that happened a few times. And so I would call a little bit with them and that was really fun. And then I decided that it was time to head back home and finish up college. And so I went back to school and rejoined the band that I'd helped start. And when we were talking, they said, "Well, you're not that great a musician, but we hear you've been doing some calling, so if you want to call, you're back in." And I don't know whether they were kidding or not, but, certainly I was really happy to call and we... There were three of us who did the calling with the band, and so we'd only have to do a third of the night at any particular time. It was kind of based on the Bowdoinham Country Dance Orchestra model where nobody really wanted to call dances but everybody in the band took a turn calling a dance or two in the evening so that they could have a dance.

And that worked pretty well for us and we ended up, I had gotten to know people on the West Coast during my trip, and I also had gone to a geology field camp in Red Lodge, Montana. And afterwards I ended up hearing that the guy that had been calling square dances in Yellowstone for the last however many years was retiring, and so they no longer had a square dance caller. So I wrote them and contacted them and asked if they wanted to have...that I was part of a touring band, and would they like to have us do a dance in Yellowstone because they weren't having any. And they said, "We'd love you to do four and we'll put you up in the four different lodges, and we'll have four dances." And I was like, "this is great. And the band was like, "Well, we have a destination."

So we ended up putting together a little tour where we drove out and we did dances on the way out. We did dances in Yellowstone, and then we went to the West Coast and did dances in the northwest and ended up in California, and then drove back home. And there were six...five of us at that point, that had kind of narrowed the band down. Our sixth member really didn't want to go on tour. And so we ended up doing it, the five of us and we had a pretty good time and we wanted to do it again the next year. But our piano player, Tim Triplett, didn't want to rewrite his dissertation by hand in the van the next summer. He'd written it by hand, the first draft.

Mary Oh, my god!

George You can't even imagine.

Mary No!

George And, so he said, "I'm still your piano player, but you need to find somebody else for the summer." So I found Ann Percival and we ended up doing the tour with her. And when we came back Tim rejoined the band and Ann and David and I formed Wild

Asparagus. I was doing the calling with Wild Asparagus and half of the calling with with Swallowtail.

Mary Amazing. So this band that you went on the tour with is Swallowtail.

George That's correct.

Mary Yes. Okay. Great, yeah, two, you know, just iconic, New England contra dance bands. What a way to start. What an amazing story.

George And it's a little bit unusual because both with Wild Asparagus and Swallowtail we had built in callers. And so, with Swallowtail, Tim Van Egmond and I shared the calling responsibilities. And with Wild Asparagus, it was just me. So it's pretty unusual. About the only other band that does that that I know of is Elixir, that has a caller that is part of the band as well. And so occasionally people ask if, you know, if we'll work with another caller and occasionally we do. But it really is, I think, a much better outcome to have the band and the caller integrated, at least for what we do. And that is different than, like a one night stand or, a local dance really, in that we're we're trying to...we have an idea of what we'd like to, have the experience like for the participants. And so there might be some hubris in there, too, but... [laughter]

Mary Well I can see the logic of having more tools and influence at your disposal if you're kind of at the helm of the music and calling package together.

George Yeah, exactly.

Choosing the caller's path

Mary Yeah. And how...it seems like you took the, whether it was, tongue in cheek or not, but you embraced being relegated to more of the caller and less of the musician in Swallowtail. How do you see the balance of calling and musicianship as it's played out since then for you?

George: Well, I have to say I have leaned heavier into the calling, than the music. And I think when we were a three piece with Wild Asparagus, I played a lot more concertina because it was piano and guitar. And then David played recorder, mostly for lead and also he was an oboist. And so he played recorder and oboe and concertina and piano. And so I really did have to play a lot more. But when we started working with fiddlers I was able to play a little less, which was great because I could pay more attention to the calling and the dancing and the sound, because usually at a dance I wear at least three hats. Sound engineer, caller, musician. And, I have a big head, but...

Mary That's a lot of hats!

George So I do take a step back on the music. I play concertina and bodhran and I can pretty easily call and do both on at the same time. But playing concertina these days and calling at the same time is a skill that I haven't really kept up with. Concertina is...your mouth is free, and so it's pretty easy to sing and that kind of thing. But making decisions and evaluating and...rather doing something that's going to be the same every time or is coordinated with something else, it's hard for me to pull off.

Mary Yeah, I can't even imagine! Well, I wonder if you feel like wandering back to...because I am particularly interested in, you know, the caller side of things. And you had time in just some amazing hubs of the contra dance scene starting around Boston and New England and then being in the Pacific Northwest and around Seattle when Sandy Bradley, who was just an iconic square dance caller, was on the scene. I'm sure you crossed paths with many other people and I wonder if you remember any significant moments or sort of how you progressed into your caller persona and your approach to what you were doing. Because first you just said "Yes!" Like, yes, I'll do this. Yes. Let's step up and see what it's about. And you know, as we're learning anything, you just discover more and more layers. So is there anything that stands out to you in that learning arc of settling into really honing your caller skills?

George Yeah, well, I'm a big fan of making mistakes. And I learned everything by doing things wrong and then trying to figure out how to make them better or improve them. And so one of the big issues, certainly in the beginning was that there wasn't a lot of resources for dancing for dances. What I'm talking about specifically is the choreography. The way I collect was by going to dances and collecting material. And then I had the advantage of having done the dance myself, so it was easier to teach the dance, and just looking at a dance on a page didn't do so much for me. It was more like going to a dance and having a feeling like, wow, this flows really well or makes it feel like it's easy to do that. And so I still tend to collect dances, dance choreography, by going to dances and then sharing that material. So having danced in a lot of different places in the country over the years, I collected dances from a lot of different callers.

There were occasions that we would get together and we'd share dance choreography. I remember going to a dance camp in California and having one of the organizers, who was a caller, say, you know, "Can I look at your call book?" And I thought, oh, yeah, sure. And so I gave him the call book to look at and I expected him to just kind of leaf through it, but he actually took it and went off and copied it and then brought it back. And I was like, I didn't exactly mean for you to do that. But I did think about it and realized that it was...I was okay with it. And since then, I've come around to the realization that my material is not...my dances are not me.

Mary Yeah.

George And so that the actual choreography and my calling is more based on what I select to present and how I present it. And that really is the essence. And that's not something that somebody else is going to take away from me. It became really clear the first time that I lost my call book. I was in Minneapolis. We used to go out and do four days of dances there: Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. And then on Sunday there was a big snowstorm, and we parked our car across from a restaurant to have a celebratory meal. And we...what our host didn't tell us was that it was a bad section of town and that we shouldn't leave anything in the vehicles. But we had soundsystem gear and our instruments and my call book was in there too. And so we went in, had a great meal, came back out, found the window broken and stuff gone. And it was, some of us had taken our instruments in, but I left the call book in the car, figuring, you know, it wasn't anything particular. So I spent the rest of the night remembering dances because we had one more dance the next day—remembering choreography and writing it out.

And then I put the word out because I was like, I don't have any dances. I don't have a copy of my call book really. I have the notes. So my process of...I go to a dance, and I

have a little notebook and I write down the choreography, or get a napkin and write down sequences or whatever. And so I had a folder full of those notes, dance notes. But not the corrections, because sometimes I'd write it down wrong, try to call it, and then find out that I hadn't written it down correctly. And so we put the word out that we'd lost instruments and sound system, and we requested that people make donations. And several callers just said, "Well, you know, you've been so generous with your dances over the years and you sent, you shared stuff with me. And so here's my dance collection." And so 3 or 4 people sent me their entire...other callers sent me their entire contra collection. And, it was...really it was heartwarming. But that's really when I fully came to realize that it wasn't the material, it was more my filter that made the difference and it made it mine as opposed to somebody else's.

But I have to say, it's gotten a lot easier with the internet and, and people making collections. And so now I can often skip the experimental stage and collect a dance and then go and look it up on the internet where somebody else has collected it and compare my notes with theirs to make sure that I've got the sequence correctly and it has a better chance of being successful right off the bat.

Collecting Dances

Mary Absolutely. And, and so at the time when you were building your dance collection, and and forgive me, you know, what kind of what era was this? And what were the dances like at that time that you were collecting them? You know, like what was kind of the new, interesting choreography? What was grabbing your eye at that time?

George Well I...so this was in, let's see...so '76 was when we started Swallowtail and '78 was when I was in the northwest, and then 1980 and '81, were the cross-country tours that I did. And then Wild Asparagus got formed in 1982 and in 1983/84 we did a ten week tour of the US, the three of us, and we did 56 dances in ten weeks and went around the country in a van. And, at the end of that, remarkably, we still wanted to continue to do dances.

Mary Good for you.

George And so I had been collecting dances sort of throughout that whole time. And, we ended up, there was a fellow Gene Hubert who had just started to get his dances out. He was very interested in having dances flow.

Mary Yeah.

George And so, when I first started dancing, Dudley Laufman was one of the callers that I would dance to. Taylor Whiteside was the other dancer, at Stratford in the Field. And they would alternate weeks, what they were doing. And I don't really know what became of Taylor so much. But Dudley certainly has been well documented, and he's kept going. And it's really interesting to see his sort of trajectory in the Amherst area. He would come down once a month and do a dance as well as had a regular round of dances around New England. And the way that he saw dancing and what he wanted to present did change over the years. Certainly I do have a lot of dances that Dudley did, because I went to his dances and collected dances from him. And, some of them I certainly used, especially the dances that I do that are more community dances as opposed to contra dances, per se.

But I was really struck by the flow of Gene Hubert's choreography. And so, I got pretty spoiled using his dances because when I was dancing his dances, it just felt like I was flying. Because. You could just relax and let the flow of the choreography carry you along. And so that really...still, that kind of feeling really appeals to me. And so I think all along I really wanted people to relate to the music. And my philosophy as a caller is that I would like to be the enzyme in the reaction between the music and the dancers, the band and the dancers. Help them interact with each other and kind of be the glue that keeps them together. And then I curate the patterns that people dance to. And I really love it when people can find me invisible. So more of an invisible hand guiding things as opposed to being the show.

Mary Awesome. And so it sounds like that was a guiding principle in the collection you're building and I love that you were staying grounded in your experience as a dancer and what you loved to feel as a dancer and then figuring out how you could create that when you were at the helm.

George Yeah. Yeah, I would say that's very true. I remember, back in the late 70s when I first started dancing and I was going to contra dances. There were some where they were called by Ted Sannella and, occasionally Ralph Page would come down from New Hampshire and call as well. And Tony Parkes, of course, was very involved with the dance scene. Tod Whittemore was, also, when I first started dancing, he was a dancer on the dance floor. He wasn't really calling yet and I can just remember that one of the things that really impressed me was how welcoming everybody was to bring people in and help them have a great time. And so I very much wanted to have that kind of experience for people.

One of my greatest lessons was provided by Ralph Page. He was definitely well known and revered by the Boston dance scene. And there was a special dance that I went to, and I hadn't been dancing for very long, and there were probably was 50 squares. So it was a really huge dance. And it was, being run by Connie and Marianne Taylor in Boston and Ralph loves to call squares. And, he also, at that point in his life, he wasn't really that tolerant of people just kind of messing around. But it was a large number of squares and he was getting everybody lined up and the squares completed and all of that. And, I was swinging with my partner, and I was using a Scandinavian dance hold that I had just learned, which was right hand on the waist of the person who you're swinging with, and the left hand's both joined underneath. And it's great, it's a very strong, stable hold, and you can really get going pretty quickly.

And so my partner and I were doing that a little bit, and the other people in the square were like, "Oh, that's a really cool hold, will you show us how to do that?" And I said, "Sure." So I was happily showing the members of my square how to do that, not paying attention to Ralph, who stopped the whole process and said, "Young man, don't do that!"

Mary Oh, wow.

George And, and I was like, oh, sure. Okay. Sorry.

Mary Oh yikes.

George And then the organizers came over and said, you know, "If you ever do that again, you're disrupting the whole evening. And if you ever do that again, we'll make sure you don't dance in Boston ever again."

Mary Wow.

George And my square mates were very supportive. They were like, "Oh, you know, we asked you to do it, show it to us. And, we're sorry that you got in trouble. And don't worry about them. They're just trying to keep the order and don't take it personally." So I stayed. I probably would have left right there if, because I was just a little bit shy and...

Mary Yeah, that would be...

George ...that was a big thing to have, you know, that many people kind of all paying attention to something that I was doing bad. And what I found out later was that Ralph Page had been calling a dance up in New Hampshire and a lumberjack had been dancing with a very small woman, and they'd been doing that swing, and he let her go, and she flew across the room and broke her leg. And so one never did that swing at one of Uncle Ralph dances. It was just, you know, that's a thing that you didn't do, which I didn't know, of course, but the lesson that I got was, it's very powerful to have to be called out and to be chastised in front of a large group of people. And that has really been a great thing to know about—and for me to not do to people when I'm calling, is that if there's something that is causing disruption or trouble that either I will talk privately with the person later or I'll send somebody over to talk with them. But never just have everybody, you know, stop and just have the whole focus being on fixing that problem or arresting them, as it were.

And it is has even filtered down something that Tony Parkes recommended was if you have somebody, if you have a behavior that you want to correct, look at another part of the hall and maybe in point to another part of the hall and say, "Let's make sure everybody's feet are on the ground when you're swinging," kind of thing, as opposed to singling out the person that's lifting somebody else up. And the person that you're pointing at is going like, "Oh, I'm not doing that. That's no problem. He must not mean me." And the person who is doing it has the reaction of, "Oh, I'm glad he didn't see me and call me out. Let's not do that." So, it was a really fun technique, or...I hate to call it a trick...

Mary A strategy.

George Strategy. There we go. Thank you.

Mary Yeah, yeah. Because, you know, once you have the full picture and sort of the safety concerns, it it makes sense. But what an effect that would have had on the whole room. And thank goodness that George Marshall didn't give up on contra dancing then!

George I know that would have been....

Mary Feeling shunned. I mean...

George ...have been very short.

Mary Rewriting history there. Wow.

[\[clip of George calling the dance Worth the Wait by Dana Parkinson at the Glen Echo Contra Dance in 2012 with music by Swallowtail \]](#)

Caller Philosophy

Mary What else...I mean, you just described a very clear vision for your caller philosophy. Or a core value is, creating a supportive environment where you can communicate about safety and expectations, but not single anybody out in front of a group. What are other things in your caller approach that have sort of solidified for you over the years or that feel really important?

George: Well, I really do want to help people have a great time. Yeah, that's kind of is my basic mission. And of course safety is an important part of having a great time because it never feels good to get hurt when you're trying to do something, and especially if somebody else does something that hurts you, not even just...you're hurting yourself. So yeah, I think that's important. I also want people to feel successful and I...one of the criticisms that I have received over the years is that I end up, perhaps choosing too easy a program, too accessible program. And I figure that when I'm selecting dances, I try to match them to the crowd and their ability. I don't go for the lowest common denominator, but I also certainly don't go for the highest. Unless it's an event that has been specifically, that people have opted in to go to that know that they're going to be challenged. And then and then I can exercise some of that choreography. Quite frankly, though, because I don't call those dances as much as I do the other ones, it's more of a challenge for me, necessarily, than the challenge for the dancers. Because if I'm doing my job well, even if people don't know the choreography but I can explain it well enough that people can do it, execute it, them. Everybody's happy.

Mary Yeah.

George So I really think that the only reason people go to, or one of the big reasons that people go to a dance is so that they can do something and they can change their state .so that they can stop worrying about their problems or challenges and can just be in the moment and be social, be with other people, and have a mission that allows them to move to music. And that really is what my goal is for people to have as to leave with, or to experience when they're dancing. And so whatever I can do to help that happen. You know, maybe calling a little bit easier dances than people could do, or not doing dances that require so much teaching that it cuts into too much dance time.

Mary And how does what you're able to do by working with the same group of musicians consistently—how does that factor into that formula of helping people feel transported on the dance floor?

George I think it makes a big difference. I think that, concretely, one of the things that I love about Wild Asparagus and bands that I've really enjoyed dancing to is the musicians pay attention to the choreography and that they play to the choreography. So, what that means is that I have noticed that people definitely react to music. And so the music sets kind of the mood and also gives people the...it's the "anti-gravity machine." When the band plays this, it lifts you along. And by playing the music in such a way that helps the dance, helps the choreography work, whether it's just, having phrases that end and then start in a way that goes with the choreography or that reminds people of where the changes are in

the patterns, to providing the lift needed to move people past or move people through the choreography. So working with a band, you can experiment and say, well, this worked really well with this particular dance or this worked really well. You notice how everybody is starting and stopping with the band, with the phrase like, there are people still doing something after you're moved on and they're supposed to be moving on, but they're still doing it, or they arrive early or late to the pattern. And by working with a band regularly, you can have those discussions and I think that really helps.

Mary Yeah, it's a really special thing and I think it translates when there's been that much collaboration between the band and the caller beyond that night. That you've had time for trial and error. It's really something special.

George And, you know, the other things that working with a band...other advantages are that you can get their attention when they need to start and when they need to end. And also that you can allow them space to develop the music and so that people can be taken on a journey when they're dancing. You know, from the beginning of a dance where you're learning the pattern and then you flow a certain way, and then when the mood or the change of tune brings you into a different dimension. There's also like, if you do a pattern for a certain number of times, and then you keep doing it, you could have an epiphany, either a physical epiphany or a mental epiphany, and see things in a different way. And I think also just that trying to match the choreography to the music it helps having experience in knowing what the repertoire is.

Mary Yeah.

George I know that, with Wild Asparagus in particular, what usually happens is I have....well, I'm just going to preface this with I have a recurring nightmare, and that is that I'm at a dance and we've just had a great dance. Just something that was really fun and successful. Or maybe not, but usually in my nightmare, it's just been really great. And then I'm looking for the next dance and I cannot find the dance that I want. And so I'm looking through my book and the band is getting restless, and the dancers are lined up and they're definitely getting restless. And now the dancers are starting to leave and the band is packing up, and I'm still trying to find the dance that I wanted and I cannot find it. And I know it's in there and I know it's the perfect dance, but I can't remember the sequence and I don't trust my memory. So I'm still looking and the lights get shut off and it's just...

So, anyway, to avoid having that happen in real life, I love to have a plan. So I'll often come up with a set list for a dance, for an evening and sometimes I have alternates for them. And the way that I sort of develop an opinion, especially in a scene that I haven't been in before is I'll talk with the organizers, or I might talk with some of the dancers, or if there's a caller I know that's called recently for the community, I'll ask them about it, about how things were going to go. About 20 years ago, I think it might have been 15, I called a dance weekend up in Alaska, and I got asked to do it again this spring, and so I talked to the callers that were there last year and talked to them about what their experience was calling. And that was really helpful for me to have an opinion about how it might go. And then once I was there, I could actually make decisions based on real information as opposed to hearsay, as it were.

But I do that for other dances. Like, I'll remember the last time I was there or I have notes. I've kept programs from when I first started calling, and sometimes I add notes to what the experience was like, tunes that were really great with particular dances or something that happened at the dance or that kind of thing. And so I love to have a program to work with,

but I also love to be able to swap in dances if it turns out that I was wrong and that say, there were a whole busload of people, of newcomers that came in and after the third or fourth dance, and I need to...instead of gradually building up repertoire, I'd have to start over again. And, in sort of getting everybody to know how to do all the moves that I want so that we can do the choreography that I have in mind. And so I love having a plan to, well, basically to, throw away and develop anew.

Mary Right. And pivot quickly.

George Yeah. And I'm really fortunate in that before Covid, when I was doing about 100 dates a year, dances a year, that I was pretty on top of my material so that I wouldn't necessarily have to have stacks and stacks of alternates for dances, but that I could remember the one, and I have a better filing system so that I can actually find what I'm looking for. And if not, then I still have my original program that I can fall back upon. So, anyway, we were talking about how working with the band. I'll have this "proto" program, as it were. And, it used to be that the band would come up with a list of tunes that they wanted to play that night, and then I would match them to the dances that I had selected. But after having the band veto the order that I picked too many times, I said, "Okay, now you get to do it and I'll be the veto."

And so what happens now is I usually give the dances to Becky, our fiddler, and she and Ann get together and plan out the tunes that they're going to play for the night. And then I'll look it over and if there's things that need to be changed, then I'll ask if it would be okay if we change them. Or if we're doing something in the night and then we need to switch the order, certainly people are willing to listen to that and try i., but it's nice because that gets them more involved in what's happening with the dancers and more familiar with the choreography they're about to play for themselves. And then when I switch a dance, well, I just have to make an executive decision sometimes.

Mary Yep. Which is sometimes the caller's right.

George And it's either a mistake, which I learn from, or it works really well. And learn from that, too.

Mary Absolutely. Oh, I love it.

Getting out there in the dance scene

George Well, you know, one thing that was certainly influential when we first started dancing. I mentioned that tour in 1984 when we did this ten week, 56 gig trip. And, you know, part of what I get often asked often about people who are wanting to start either as musicians or as callers to become known and get to do some of the fun kind of, larger events and dance weekends and dance weeks, is how do you get your name out there? How do you develop? And of course, persistence is the key to success with anything. But being in the right place at the right time is really important too, because that's what kind of creates the happy accident of getting to be known. And our motivation for doing the tour was that David and I had done two tours, and we noticed that our musicianship and our skills really, it's kind of...It was very much like our experience with recording is that your focus on something really kind of catapults you to the next level. As far as, you gain more

abilities and because you've done it a lot. There's nothing like experience to really help you progress, as it were.

And so our main thing of wanting to do the trip was that we knew that we couldn't do 56 dances in ten weeks by staying at home, and that...only by us going to the dancers would we be able to get that experience. And so our motivation was really to do more dances so that we can have more experience and also to do some traveling, which was really great because our experience had been when we went somewhere, people would show us their favorite places to go and fun things that you probably would have to live somewhere to for ten years before you discovered it on your own kind of thing. So it really helped accelerate stuff.

And one of the things that helped for us to accelerate was that we met a lot of people along the way. And we did a dance in Brasstown, North Carolina at the folk school there. And they really loved what we did, and they asked us to come back and be program directors, for their week-long camp. And so we got to do that. So that was in 1985 and that really kind of changed our perspective from being just performers into directing or doing a program and hiring other musicians and callers and dance teachers to do that. And that was really a great additional way and we did that twice. And that also exposed us to other people. We would be invited to events. For example the Lady of the Lake dance events—we had played in Spokane on the way out and met Penn Fix who had started off in Boston, but then moved to Eastern Washington and organized dances there. And we've met some of the California people also. And then when they had an event that they wanted to have a band, they thought of us. And so we got invited to do that. And so really that was kind of the experience that helped people know that we were out there and we were interested in doing things.

And then, of course, once we were doing events, we would then be a reasonable choice because they saw that we'd been doing stuff in other places. And the word was, fortunately it was good in most cases so we're able to keep doing it. And the other thing, or one of the advantages of doing week long events was that there were often workshops. And often I would be asked to a callers workshop and for me that was both terrifying and exhilarating. I learned early on that I love to make things up and that I... So that I would try to explain what I was doing without really knowing what I was doing. And it was really only by sort of making it a proposition and having people try it out that I could see that I was wrong about the proposition. Or that I was right, because, you know, both things happened.

I do remember that the first dance callers workshop that I did, which was at the Augusta Workshops and the way we designed the workshop was that we would have a class session where we would practice calling, and I talk about calling. And then we would get together and have a lunch together where we'd have an informal discussion about how the class went and if people had questions. And that was really valuable because it meant that we didn't have to spend that much time in the class, kind of not on point, but when we were socializing and having lunch, we could ask questions. And I remember about the third day of the six class series that we got to lunch and everybody had gotten there. I got there a little bit late, and everybody was there, and they were really quiet, and I got my food and I sat down and I was thinking, "Oh, what's up?" And, when one of them said, "Well, okay, so we're really enjoying this workshop. We're getting great information. It's really fun. But we noticed that when you're calling the evening dance with Wild Asparagus, that you're breaking all the rules that you gave us."

Mary What a great class! To advocate for their education!

George And then I had to come clean and said, well, you know, I make up these rules or these explanations, but clearly there are exceptions. And what I'm trying to do is I'm trying to parse this information and get it to the point that maybe you can find it useful to try something, but as you see, I'm breaking all the rules. And yet it works. And so partly, take what I'm saying with a grain of salt. But then also, you know, this is why I'm doing it this way, and I haven't really had a discussion with a lot of other teachers of any subject about how to get the information across. And, you know, "Do you kind of make up some rules and then see if they actually work or not?" Or how it works, and it'd be interesting to do it. But anyway, that was my process. But for me that was great to be called to task. And it was also great to see that the practicalities are different, necessarily, than the theories. And so it kind of also made me not take myself so seriously, because clearly it was funny what was happening.

Mary Yeah. And they were clearly paying attention, you know, they were thinking about what you said and trying to apply it and then coming up with some questions.

George And it's been really satisfying over the years to have people that we've had interactions with, you know, at those workshops and that they are still calling and, and really that is very fun. And also another consequence of getting more experience and more time is to kind of see the results of the energy that people have put into making music and dance stuff happen. That's been really great.

Mary So it's just so refreshing to just hear your perspective on, you know, "I don't always know." I don't always have a plan, but sometimes I just keep going and adjust and react. I've been in recent years learning to lead balfolk dancing, you know, sort of a new genre for me. And I was at the end of a night of dancing once and someone came up to me who's, I think his career had been as a high school teacher, and he was so wonderful. I think I'd sort of had some bumps in the evening and he just said, "You know, teaching...I was a teacher for many years." He said, "Teaching is something that you can't practice alone. You're limited how much you can really prepare and practice when you're teaching other people. They're the variables and you just don't know how it's going to go until you're there doing it live in the moment." And it was just such a kind, wise thing to share, that, you know, the learning process happens in the moment in front of people, with people. And there's just...there's not much else you can do about it. And so everyone is showing up for it. I love that.

George That's wonderful. That really does...that must have felt great at the time. But also what a great insight.

Mary Yeah, it's let me, you know, relax a few notches too. When I'm stepping out and trying something new, it's like, "Well, here I go. I'm going to practice some more in front of this crowd."

George Right. Exactly. Yeah. You know, everybody's going to make mistakes. And it's really all in the recovery from those things and to see what people need. And it's very rare, I mean, it's really interesting as a caller, you get to see physical manifestations of what you're saying. Like when you say, you know, "All go forward and back," you get to see everybody going forward and back. And I wish that more people had that experience of having what's in their head manifest out in the rest of the world.

Mary Absolutely.

George And you can see, oh, all the different ways that you can be interpreted, what you're saying. So it does help you learn how to get more consistent results with your words and you get instant feedback. And so it's easier to pivot. But man, I just, I couldn't anticipate how people would react to what is being said. And that is really what that teacher was telling you, was that, you know, it's really hard to teach if you don't have people that are learning there. So you can see how they react to what you're saying.

Mary Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. I feel like I have a very strong memory from my first time on stage of saying, you know, "circle to the left," and then everybody was doing, you know, I was lucky to be calling for a group of experienced dancers. So they knew what was happening. But there was still just that, you know, letting that settle in of like, "Oh, this group of people is going to try and do what I say," is pretty awe inspiring.

George After working with David Cantini for a number of years, I remember one interaction we had where, I think he was we were talking about calling and we were at a dance and he said, well, I guess what it was. He said, "Oh yeah, you know, calling looks really easy," or is pretty easy. And, and I was like, "Oh, would you like to call a dance?" And so he got the microphone and that the short story is that he decided that calling wasn't that easy. And it felt like he had a little more respect for what I was talking about.

Mary Excellent. I'm glad he stepped up to that invitation.

George It's really great it's like, if you know how to play the fiddle and then you change your hands, you know, bow hand and fiddle hand and you try to play, you kind of see, you can see how it is challenging and the progress that you've made. And, it was really a gift for him to, as you say, step up and try it and then for me to see what the results were, because it said, "Oh, yeah, okay. I remember being there and I'm really appreciative of where I am now."

[\[clip of George calling the dance Salute to Larry Jennings by Ted Sannella and Russell Owen at the Greenfield, MA contra dance in 2011 with music by Wild Asparagus \]](#)

Changes over time

Mary What have you seen change over the years with the caller's job? You know, obviously we're kind of well down the road now with a big change in terminology for roles. You know, are there other changes in what's required for you as a caller that stand out? And how have you navigated them?

George Wow. I can see a lot of different approaches to that question.

Mary Yeah, it's a broad question.

George So please do bring me back when I've ranged far enough away. One of the things that is interesting to me is often I'll get asked what is it like to dance in Greenfield, for example, which is Wild Asparagus's hometown dance. Because of course, people want to know what, if they're living in, say, Bloomington, Indiana, they want to know what it's like for people dancing in Greenfield, Massachusetts or whatever. And, you know, it's one way

of making conversation, but it's also a sincere interest, like, "So what is it like dancing in Seattle? And really unless I've gone to a dance and I'm kind of incognito and I can go to the dance and experience what it's like, it's very hard for me to say how it's different because the dances I call, the music the band plays all shape people's experience and how they react to what it feels like.

So when we're out traveling and touring, it often feels like the dance is the same everywhere, because we're really using the same choreography that we use back home. We're playing the same tunes, the sets. People are reacting to them the same way. So it's hard to know. And in some ways answering your question about how things have changed, it's really more about how what we're presenting has changed. And I have to say that it doesn't feel like the main mission, which is to help people have a good time, creating a safe space for them to interact and have success in their experience, that really hasn't changed so much. And I wouldn't...I would hope that it wouldn't, because I think it's a really great goal to have.

Mary Kind of the essence.

George It is. I think the big change really came kind of early on when we went from dancing the chestnuts. So those are the dances that are older and would have active and inactive roles as opposed to the equal opportunity dances. One of the things that I do occasionally is I look through my dance programs and see what dances that I am calling and picking out for dances, and kind of as I'm rotating through my repertoire and sort of as new choreographers come on the scene and I start collecting dances... I used to call a lot of Gene Hubert dances and also Cary Ravitz dances.

I can remember sort of before the Gene Hubert dances, I was leaning more toward doing Ted Sannella dances. He had a really good eye for choreography and of course, some of Tony Parkes' repertoire. And mostly a lot of, I would say probably a third of the choreography that I'm calling now is, are probably dances that are devised by Bob Isaacs. I really enjoy his eye to it. And it's really been nice that people often people send me dances that they've enjoyed doing, that they've written. And, sometimes I can incorporate those, although I do have to favor dances that I actually have danced myself. That is still my preferred way to collect them.

So I think things haven't changed too much in how I collect dances, and that really informs the dances that I'm calling. I still really like having dances that flow as really being kind of my main goal is I want people to feel like the sequences flow from one to another and so there's not a lot of stopping and backing up and changing directions in a weird way or a way that doesn't feel good.

Having Covid interrupt things was a really big thing that we're still kind of recovering from. And right before that there was a big terminology push. There were changes in the words that people were wanting to call different figures. And then there was the gender role terminology. For me fortunately, it's not been too hard to use different words to actually convey... And I remember going from when I first started calling terminology was "ladies and gents." And then there was a long period of time that it was "men and women." And then it went back to "ladies and gents," which was really interesting. And then from then went to non-gender terms. And the first experience I had with that were "armbands and bare arms."

Mary Yes, Chris Ricciotti kind of started that.

George Yeah, and there was a fellow, I'm trying to remember his name. He was dancing in North Carolina and then ended up moving to the West Coast, and had a really deep interest in English country dancing. And I remember going to—Graham Christian I believe was his name—and he was at a dance camp doing English country dance where Wild Asparagus was doing contra dancing outside of Eugene, Oregon. And it was my first experience with positional dancing, non-gender term dancing. And, his philosophy was very much that if you needed to use terms, you could use "bare arms and armbands," but that he would talk about diagonals and about people that were in the right file and the left file—those being the two lines for dances where you're dancing, facing another, another person—and that to get a partner you just lined up in one of those files, and then somebody would come and stand in front of you so you wouldn't actually be asking people to dance in particular. You would dance with whoever was standing in that position. But anyway, that was interesting exposure.

And then it went from there to really focusing on whether we should end up with, "lakes and rivers" or "larks and robins," which we ended up mostly doing these days. And so just substituting terms was pretty easy. I guess, I think it's still evolving to a certain extent. And there are some communities that are requesting ladies and gents and there are a bunch of communities that are requesting larks and robins, and I'm happy to go with whatever terminology will work for the most people, as it were.

Mary It's good that the conversation is happening.

George I completely agree and I have noticed that it does make a difference. Words are powerful.

Mary Yeah. Yeah, I think so, too. And how about, I mean, I love what you said about if your core motivation or goal is the same, that that kind of carries through, even as particulars might change and adapt over time. Do you...you know there's just inherent repetition in calling and dancing. That we call the same dances over and over, you know, there's tons of variables, but how do you think about still doing this after after decades. Are you ever tired? Or, yeah, I don't know what word. And, you know, obviously I'm asking this out of self-interest because sometimes I have to sort of find my way back in. And I'm feeling like, oh, I'm doing another dance...yeah I'm just wondering if you ever have moments of being like, "Oh, I've done this...a lot," and how can I find the the spark again?

George Yeah. Well, I think for me, being a musician as well as being a caller definitely helps, because of my relationship with the music. I think that I do find working with Wild Asparagus is very satisfying and it's really fun. It's also really fun for me to work with other bands as well and see the music that they're bringing to the event and where things have ended up. It is very inspiring. But for me, really, the touchstone is the dancing part. Is that when I'm going out dancing, if I'm feeling like, "Okay, I don't think I really can call another dance," it is great for me to kind of...it really helps with renewal. To go out and dance and to interact with people and that really reminds me of how, you know, kind of what the whole point is, which is to help people have a great time.

I do feel differently than I did, say, ten, 15 years ago. I remember a caller friend who had been calling and really had developed into a fantastic caller. And, I remember him, deciding to go in the direction of music and playing music instead of calling and pretty much gave up calling, and just doing a few things here and there, but mostly playing music. And his question was, well "So George, you know, are you ready to stop yet?" And

I was thinking like I can't imagine being ready to stop it just, you know, and it's just too much fun. And it's really affecting people in a great way, to be providing this opportunity. Dancing is such a renewing, energizing thing. And so I really want to be able to contribute to that.

And, you know, now I'm feeling, especially after Covid, which was...I didn't really see a way to stop because in some ways. I was getting hired 2 or 3 years in advance. And so in order to honor those commitments, I had to keep up the momentum. In other words, if I was to take a job in three years, then I would have to keep doing...for those in between [years] where I was then...to there, to keep going ahead and doing the work. Because otherwise I would be so out of shape that it wouldn't, you know, there would be no point in hiring me in three years time. But with Covid, everything stopped completely. And it really made me understand that it is possible to stop. You just stop and say no and then you don't book anything else, and you do it up until the time you can. Or in the Covid case, you just stop. And that made it much more meaningful when I would say 'yes' to doing something. It made me a little more selective, and it made me feel like, I'm really...I have a choice. I could stop or I could keep going. And that is a very, that really makes me feel much more free and much more enthusiastic. Rather than saying, "Okay, just gotta keep doing this because that's what I'm doing.

Mary Yeah. Yeah.

George I do love traveling and presenting dance and music to people. I love our community that we have at our local dance. Our once a month Wild Asparagus dance in Greenfield has been really fun. It's great to see people, and visit with them and have them enjoy the music and the dancing. It feels great to be able to contribute that way. But I also feel that, you know, if I have to stop tomorrow for whatever reason, I have accomplished my goal of increasing the fun and happiness quotient in the world. And I'm very gratified and proud of that.

Mary As you should be. Absolutely. That's a good feeling.

George It is a really great feeling and it also helps not feeling like, okay, I have something to prove for. Even though I definitely still enjoy it. I can also relax and say, okay, this is good.

Closing

Mary Yeah. What a great conversation!

George Well, thank you for the opportunity. It's really fun to share this with you and with whoever ends up listening to this.

Mary Yes, yes, I think we'll have many eager listeners. And I have three questions that I usually close with. So here we go. The first is whether you have any pre- or post- gig rituals, things that you kind of do to get ready to go on stage or wind down afterwards.

George Usually thinking about the dance ahead of time and planning the program is my pre- dance, kind of ritual, but it is done often a day or two ahead. I try to avoid doing it the same day, certainly recently, to try to figure out what I would call because it really pulls me

in to think about the music. It pulls me into thinking about who I'm going to be calling for and presenting the dances. And then I really enjoy the process of crafting the program. So to make sure that there aren't like, every dance has a forward and back or every dance has a chain, or they're all hey for four dances or whatever, right? Just that technical thing where I can really get into my head and look at it. And that kind of sets me up for doing it. There is a kind of, in some ways setting up for the dance, because we're setting up sound, with Wild Asparagus I'm setting up sound with the band. And often if I'm working with other bands, I'll do sound for them as well. And that kind of ritual of putting the sound system together and getting that all together. That kind of feels like a ritual at this point. And then I think driving home from the dance is what happens afterwards.

Mary One would hope. Yes.

George Yeah, it occurs to me that one of the things that has been most helpful for me developing as a caller has been to record myself calling. It's really hard for me to watch a video of me calling, but audio works better. And so sometimes I will play on the drive home a recording of what I've been doing. That's not necessarily the most relaxing, but it is kind of fun to be brought back to that time. And I find that I learn a lot about what I'm saying when I'm not in the moment. And so that's really been the most helpful tool.

Mary Yeah. And I'm sure that keeps you awake in the car, too.

George It certainly does.

Mary Great. And then I have loved hearing from everyone that I talked to about how they keep their dance collection. How do you notate your dances? Are you cards? Have you gone digital? You know, it's a part of being a caller that I like hearing different approaches to that sort of, curatorial aspect of this.

George Sure. Well, remember I mentioned about losing my dance book for the first time?

Mary Yes.

George And so I realized that I really needed to have some kind of a copy of it. And at that point, I had learned how to use a digital database called FileMaker Pro. And so I ended up typing all the dances from those notes and importing the dances and typing in dances that were given to me, the dance collections. So I built a database to hold those dances so that I could search on the different fields and then also print them. So I was able to print on pages. And I decided that a half sized sheet was a good enough size. Index cards were a little bit too small for me to see easily. And so I wanted a little bit bigger format. So I used an eight and a half by, whatever a half sheet is, 5 inches by, 5.5 inch format.

And so it's in a ring binder. So the individual pages are that are the dances. And so when I take notes at a dance I do an AABB format, so A1, A2, B1, B2. And that helps with knowing... like not necessarily putting in too many moves, or it just helps organize a little bit. It also helps because the music is organized that way, to match that up. And so I have a, three ring binder that has the individual dances in it, and if I need to print them out in another format, I could actually put them on index cards if I wanted. I did put that capability in the database. Or if somebody would like the choreography or dance, I can just cut and paste it into an email or text messages, which is quite handy. And if I'm searching to see if it's already in my database, I can search on all the different fields. So by author or title or particular moves. If I want all the dances that have a chain across, or if I want to do global

changes, like for example, if I want to change all the, the "ladies" to, "robins" or whatever, I can search and replace, that kind of thing. So it's really nice to be able to do that.

So that's, so in addition to recording the dance programs in a notebook where I usually put the dance name, so I can find it again and the music that was played with it, in addition I keep those notes. But for the calling book, what I'll do is I'll take out the pages that I want to use and then for the program and I put them in the order so I can physically lay them out in the order and compare what the different figures are, kind of laid out in front of me. It also helps Becky when she is picking tunes that she can just look at the lay the dances out, and then her process as she turns over a dance when she's assigned to tune a set to it, and then whenever all turned over, then she'll have that all setup. And it's good because it's in a three ring binder. If the breeze comes up and blows, the whole pile of dances don't just go scattering all over the place. Or if I drop the box, the cards aren't scrambled.

Mary Yeah, yeah.

George It works pretty well for me. And it's nice because I can...my dance repertoire at this point is, when it's printed out, it's much larger than could fit in a ring binder.

Mary Right.

George So I really have noticed that I use probably about 120, 150 dances, pretty much regularly. And then and then I try to cycle in other ones, so that there's some variety. I really try to make sure that if we're on tour, for example, I do a tour in the northwest where we do 9 or 10 dances in 9 or 10 days. I try to make sure that the people that are following us around are not dancing the same evening of choreography every time. Their experience would probably be different, because the band would likely play other tunes and they'd have other partners. But still, I like...for my own sense of pride I like to have different programs.

Mary Absolutely, yeah.

George So that's what I...that's how I organize and keep my dances.

Mary Lovely, and people can check the show notes for a glimpse of the dance book. Which I'm glad you have backed up.

George Me, too. Because I've lost my call book twice since then. Once another by...well actually, all three times have been because my bag has been taken.

Mary Oh my gosh. Oh. That's rough. Yeah, probably something that, you know, I just imagine someone stealing that and then going, you know, what is this?

George Totally useless to anybody else. It just was collateral damage as they say.

Mary Yeah, yeah.

George But I was really, again, going back to that generosity of people, sending me their collections to help me build up my repertoire again. It was just so amazing to experience that.

Mary That is very special.

George I know that there's another caller who's dances were taken. He lost them at a dance and decided not to call anymore because he had lost his collection of dances and couldn't imagine trying to build it up again.

Mary Yeah, yeah. That's painful.

George Yeah.

Mary All right. Well, concluding question. My own curiosity about people and personalities of colors. If you know, are you an introvert or an extrovert?

George I would say I'm probably a hybrid. Mostly I'm an introvert, and I judge that by...after I have gone out and performed that I need some time to recharge on my own. But I definitely get energy from people and from performing. So it's, I think really some of both, at least as I understand it anyway. So, you know, I feel like if somebody says, well, so what are you? And I would say probably an introvert, but again, I have some extrovert things that happen.

Mary Yeah, yeah, I think it's on a spectrum. I should start asking it in that way.

George Where in the spectrum do you fall?

Mary Yeah. It's not a either or. But I'm just always curious as someone who is, you know, at the center of a roomful of people it's just interesting how people have all different relationships to to that experience.

George Yeah. A person that was really influential to me was Fred Park. I met him kind of early on, in the late 70s. And I remember being really impressed with his with his calling and his building of a community and his storytelling and all of that. And I remember getting to...so when I was in college and he and his then wife were touring, because I had met him at a dance camp. He called me up and said, "Hey, can you arrange some gigs for me?" And so I helped set up some concerts and dances for them as part of the tour. And so I got to know him, you know, more than somewhat...and also having spent some time with him and being at dance camps on staff with he and his girls, got to meet his daughters when they were really young. And, it was nice to have kind of a long term relationship with him. And I remember having a conversation with him kind of early on about what it's like to be a caller and center of attention. But also the really big thing was, I'm trying to remember exactly what prompted him to talk about it. I think I might have said, "Well, you know, of course you must feel this..." or whatever. And, he looked at me, kind of square in the eye and said, "You really don't know me."

And it's really hard because people bring their assumptions with them when you're interacting and when you are in a position of being in the center of attention, being a celebrity, people bring those expectations much more so than they would do if they didn't have any kind of stake in it. And I was really struck by that insight about the fact that we...it's hard to know other people. And we do make assumptions about how they are and what they're thinking. And it helped me by, well, not taking myself too seriously, for one thing. And trying to hold on to myself without being shaped by people's expectations. And I think that was really what he was saying was that as a caller who was very charismatic and very...kind of did a lot of really interesting and sometimes risky things, that people had assumptions about who he was and how he was. And that he was able to say, you know,

"No, really, think about it. What do you really know?" And what are you bringing to your expectation about how you'll be? And that was very, very useful information. And I really feel like I tried to incorporate it so that when I'm interacting with people I try to make sure that I don't fall into their expectations so much, but that I can hold on to what my experience is. So that I can take compliments or criticisms with a grain of salt, and keeping in mind what other people are thinking about me, it's really none of my business.

Mary Beautiful. Wow, what a great story. And, a great bit of wisdom for callers out there. And thank you, George, for sharing a little bit of yourself with us here today on From the Mic.

George You're very welcome. It's been a pleasure.

Thank Yous

Thanks so much to George 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!

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