

Mary Wesley Hello From the Mic listeners. Welcome back to another caller conversation. Today we'll join Peter and Mary Alice Amidon in their living room in Brattleboro, Vermont!

Mary Alice and Peter met in 1975 at a Ted Sannella contradance in Cambridge Massachusetts. They both became immersed in the rich life of traditional dance and song first in Cambridge and then in Brattleboro where, in 1978, they'd moved and married, and where they still live, dance, play, and teach music today—though they are enjoying retirement after an amazing shared career.

In our interview we talk about their individual beginnings with music and dance before they met up on the dance floor, their decades of teaching music and dance to kids in elementary schools, and of course the origins of the New England Dancing Masters, their shared endeavor with fellow southern Vermont contra dance musicians and music teachers Mary Cay Brass and Andy Davis. For over 30 years the NEDM have published books, recordings and videos of traditional dances and singing games for children and community dance leaders. In 2023 they were collectively awarded the CDSS Lifetime Contribution Award.

You'll also get to hear about Peter's adventures with calling for contra dances as part of the Amidon Family Band tour, which Peter and Mary Alice organized when their sons, Sam and Stefan were in their teenage years (including how they passed those long hours in the car.) Mary Alice delves into the wonders of play-party games and the rewards of working with teachers and both she and Peter share their wealth of wisdom gained through inspiring people of all ages by simply being "The Amidons."

So, here we go into their living room. During our chat they sat side-by-side on their couch and I recorded them with just one microphone (they're good at sharing), so you'll hear them passing the mic back and forth.

Beginnings

Mary Wesley Mary Alice and Peter Amidon, hello and welcome to From the Mic!

Mary Alice Amidon Hello. Nice to be here.

Peter Amidon Very happy to be here.

Mary Wesley I'm happy to be here with you in your living room, which is a rare treat for me to get to do one of these interviews in person. And so, as I've been telling you a little bit, "From the Mic" is interested in North American dance calling, broadly, and the

people who do it. The people who lead all different kinds of dances in different settings—contra dancing, square dancing, community dancing. When I think of you both, I think that you are two of the four "New England Dancing Masters," you have literally written many books about...especially leading community dancing and dancing for children and dancing in classrooms, that I'm sure many, many people, myself included, have referenced over the years. But I would love to back up and kind of hear a bit of your individual and collective origin story and hear a little bit, how did you start getting involved with traditional music dance and how did you start stepping into the role of making it happen in the many ways that you do? Mary Alice, do you want to start?

Mary Alice Amidon Sure. Well, I grew up in a very...music was a big part of my growing up, but it was mostly classical and early music, Renaissance music. I loved all of that. But it wasn't until I went to graduate school at the University of New Hampshire and Jane Miller, who I interned with as a first grade teacher that year, took me to my first weekend of contra dances in Antrim, New Hampshire, Nelson and Peterborough. And then they said, "You want to come next weekend?" I said, "Sure!" And we went to a few more. And so I think we even went to a Duke Miller dance in Frankestown. And from the first balance and swing I was just hooked.

In college at Earlham, which was a Quaker college in Indiana, I had fallen in love with international folk dancing the last two years, and I just lived for Friday nights. But I hadn't heard of contra dancing until I came here. But the buzz-step swing, giving weight, the music I loved. And I went to the first dance with—Rod and Randy Miller were playing and Jack Perron was calling and Jane gave me a little tutorial on the balance and swing. I also then the next year got a job in a daycare center with all black kids in a high rise in Cambridge and concurrently took classes in children's folk music with Jackie Spector. And I got an Appalachian dulcimer and we discovered shape-note music. And we went to...I met Peter at my first contra dance at the Cambridge Y, and we danced every dance that first night. And for both of us, I think it was a time of discovering the whole world of shape-note music.

On the weekend we went to the Greater Boston Folk Song Society up in New Hampshire. We did our first shape-note singing and therefore started going to a regular sing formed at Poppy Gregory's house in Belmont. And then got later invited to go on tour with Bread and Puppet Theater, and did at one point a whole show based around shape-note singing as well as early music. I think that's where we just got involved in the folk community and we had...Peter had folk music parties at his house with Irish tunes, so that was a whole world in itself. And Morris dancing! It was just an incredible time.

Mary Wesley One thing after another!

Mary Alice Amidon That was in 1975 and 1976, and then I'll let Peter take over, but that's how it started for me.

Peter Amidon Well, in third grade, I went to a one room schoolhouse in Monterey, Massachusetts, and it had third, fourth, fifth and sixth grades in it. And we had a phys ed teacher who came and visited us once a week, and it was just a one room schoolhouse. So if it was a nice day, we had phys ed outside, but we had to fit inside a lot because we had it all winter long even if it was raining. And whenever we had inside phys ed, we always did the same thing. We pushed the chairs to the sides, the desk to the sides, we chose our own partners, we'd make square sets.

I don't remember her teaching us, but Mrs. Shaw, Helen Shaw taught us square dancing to her own piano playing and calling. And she taught us the buzz step swing. But I don't remember learning, again, we just did these really great square dances and we loved it. Third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, sixth grade. So by the time we were in sixth grade, we were great dancers. Everybody loved to dance. It wasn't a question of whether you loved the dance or...it was just so wonderful.

And then and there were also...at the Firemen's Picnic, Wild Bill Hall would call square dances. There was a dance tradition, after we went Christmas caroling we would go to Gould Farm's big farmhouse, and there was a guy calling just to his own accordion playing. And those are some really high, high points of my youth, just those memories. I didn't dance as a teenager. But after college I was living in Cambridge and I was studying early music and I met Annie O'Brien, the concertina player for the Muddy River Women's morris team. And we met in a therapy group actually, and she played and at one of these, we had a little party with our therapy group. And she played the concertina—Irish tunes and the concertina. And I just flipped out and I just...

So we got together and I played my viol da gamba. She'd teach me Irish tunes and I'd play viol da gamba with her and we're just...and she introduced me to Irish tunes sessions and to sacred harp singing and to just singing parties and morris dancing. And took me to my first contra dance, which was a Dudley Laufman contra dance in Maine. And I remember I was so excited because I knew how to do it. I mean, it just was like I had done it yesterday. It was all the same stuff it was just, I hadn't done contra dancing before, but all the square dance stuff I'd learned was really...

And I remember I was just so excited. At one point I was swinging this woman, this young woman, and I stopped swinging quite fast and she spun right into the other set, you know. And that was a great lesson. But that was just how enthusiastic I was about it. And it was kind of, it was really...it was like being born again in a way. And I just gave up early music and I totally got immersed in traditional music. Annie took me to Pinewoods and that's where I became really a serious singer. I hadn't done a lot of singing before that. But it was like John [Roberts] and Tony Barrand and Margaret MacArthur and Jean Ritchie and just so many amazing traditional singers were there. And of course the dancing was spectacular.

And so that just kind of...I feel like Pinewoods is kind of...the Pineywoods Family Weeks, we went...and then a couple of years later, we went for our honeymoon in 1978 to American Week. And then we started being hired for Family Weekend around 1981

or 2. And we did it every year. And that was just my college. That was my advanced degree and traditional music and dancing. Bob Dalsamer and all the others...Bob Dalsamer particularly, I have to say. In terms of community dance, he was...and Sandy Bradley too. I learned a lot about how to call from Sandy Bradley. She had this kind of, [in a calling voice] "Circle to the left, to the left you go and circle the right..." You know, this kind of like...and she just had this great patter call, which is really what I've modeled...if I modeled my calling with anybody was Sandy Bradley.

So and I just...you know we had a bunch of adventures in Cambridge, went to the Bread and Puppet theater and we moved to Brattleboro and we were going to the contra dances. And we hired...we had a contra dance for their wedding in 1978. And that was just a really big part of our...singing was a really big part, especially Sacred Harp singing, shape-note singing. But dancing was a very, very important part of our lives, contra dances. And I wasn't a caller at all then. That's a whole different story.

Teaching in schools

But then when we...I'll just kind of finish this little bit by saying that Becky Graber, our good friend Becky Graber, was teaching at Winhall School and some other schools. And she said to me—right after I moved to Brattleboro in '78, she said, "You know, I'm giving up this job in Winhall, which is up in Stratton Mountain area, a little tiny school that had a fourth through sixth grade class, and a first through third grade class into kindergarten. And they had a full day music teaching position. So I just took it even though I had no education at all, no music education training. All I had was what I knew about music from college—I had been a music major. But mostly the singing and dancing, traditional singing and dancing we were doing. So I basically just sang and danced with the kids. And that was kind of like, in a way, the beginning of our career as music and dance educators was just the fact that instead of trying to fulfill a kind of curriculum that I probably should have been doing, I just sang and danced with the kids all the time.

And for the dancing, I'd take the community dance manuals and dances that I'd learned at Pinewoods and just find dances in them. And then I'd often adapt them. And again, that was kind of like the seeds of both my career and also of all the publications that we ended up putting out of these dances that were English and American dances that usually were adapted for children, because I just kind of did it on the spot. And then you find how, you know, what worked.

Mary Wesley Yeah. And was that, to your knowledge, that idea of bringing these kinds of dances and dance traditions into a setting where just children were going to be able to do them, and do them just with each other. Versus, you know, many dance community dances are kind of intergenerational. And you will see children, you know, mixed ages out on the dance floor. But it's a whole different thing, and what I feel like a lot of your focus has been is how can you support kids in doing this entirely themselves, with each other? Were you seeing that as kind of a new approach in some ways?

Peter Amidon I didn't think of it as a new approach because I'd done it as a kid when I was in elementary school. So actually, and that's another point that I'd like to make is that, I loved to dance when I was a kid. And as I mentioned before, she was a great teacher and we just loved the dances. That was my grounding. And because of that, I think I knew that they would love to dance. And just that attitude is actually the most important part of the teaching in a way, is the fact that I just love the dance, and I'm confident they're going to love to dance, and that's kind of infectious. So there's a lot of technique and tricks and dances and variations, but that's really the main...and I think that's one reason it worked so well.

I wasn't at all worried that they were not going to dance. Certainly there's kids who, you know, either, you know, are kind of sullen or act out or...and there's different ways of dealing with that. But I think with sullen kids it's sort of, I feel like I learned the technique of just kind of tricking them out of their sullenness. Partly by doing dances that are challenging for them, and maybe sometimes making some of the negative role models into a leader for the other kids and stuff like that. But no, it was kind of, it was what I knew. And it didn't seem, it seemed the most natural thing to do.

And of course, shortly after that, Andy [Davis] and Mary Cay [Brass] and Mary Alice all became music teachers too. And we were all doing this, and we were all having a meeting. The four of us had meetings, just music teacher meetings. We had no idea we're going to become a company at that point or publishers. But we just had meetings and we'd talk about what dances we taught that worked and what songs we'd taught that worked. And sometimes for example, Andy would say to me, "You know, I did this great dance." He'd say, "I did this really wonderful dance. It was really great." But it's just, we couldn't remember who had introduced the dances after a while; they became so common to us. Like we just didn't know the first one who taught it because it became kind of our bread and butter. So, "Did you?" "No, I taught that!" "No, I got that from Mary Cay," you know? And it was true actually, that we'd all done it because we'd all done these variations and had come up with this one way of doing it, or a couple of ways of doing it that was very successful.

Mary Wesley Lovely. Yeah, Mary Alice, do you want to talk a bit about how you started teaching dance?

Mary Alice Amidon Yes I mean, I didn't teach, even though I had a master's in Elementary Ed I've never been a classroom teacher. But when Peter was working in schools and then later on doing residencies, and he was having so much fun, I just thought, "Well, I think I'm ready now that my boys are older to get out there." And so we shared a music teaching job at Academy School in West Brattleboro, and we started the All School Sing with K-6 every Wednesday for a half hour. And we made sure that every teacher we went to in the classrooms where we taught music—we did not have a music room—had the tables and desks all moved when we walked in the door for like a 40 minute class. And every single week we danced with all the grade levels. We didn't do so much in the evening dances with families. But we did later on as artists in the schools, traveling around doing residencies. That become a part of our program.

But for seven years I was at Academy and I remember one day I asked the sixth grade, "Well, would you rather watch a video or dance?" And they voted to dance. And as Andy would say, kids love to sashay. And just, any time the Virginia Reel, Alabama Gal, Noble Duke of York, those kinds of things were always very successful. But the play parties were my love and younger ages of kids. I remember when Bessie Jones, who wrote the book *Step It Down*, as a collection of the amazing singing games that were from her time in the Georgia Sea Islands. She came and actually did some of those games in Cambridge after a concert with the Folk Song Society. And then in Orff, we both took Orff levels, which is very good for music education and dance is a big part of that and play parties. And began collecting from, again at Pinewoods and people like Jane Miller.

So I always found kids love to move and I just would love the flowing between different kinds of dances, mixers and circle games and contras in lines. But also just dances kids could do to warm up, standing up. So that's when, down the line we developed more books and resources for finger plays and stories and games. Andy and I did a book together called *I'm Growing Up*. Before that, Peter and I had done *Down in the Valley* and *Jump Jim Joe*, which we changed to *Rise, Sally Rise*. And that's just been my bread and butter for years, like old friends, those games. And I really appreciated that part of it.

Mary Wesley Yeah. I mean, you're both describing, you know, just jumping with both feet into this world and, you know, so many different ways to connect with singing groups, learning instruments, playing with people, dancing yourselves, teaching people to dance. I wonder if you can kind of tune in to your dance leader self, when you're stepping into that role because you have so much at your disposal. You know, being able to lead song, being able play music to accompany dance. But what are you...I don't know, what's your approach and what have you learned over the years from teaching kids?

Teaching kids to dance

Mary Alice Amidon I think one thing in kids and also teachers is the dynamic nature of those moving parts where they're not sitting for too long, they're not dancing for too long. They're mixed up as dance partners. Sometimes we would let them choose partners, sometimes we would have game ways to do it, random things, or we would assign partners. How to just keep it flowing and age appropriate. And the whole evolution of "gent/lady" was probably a factor in our teaching. I mean, I never did gender teaching growing up when I first started off. But anyway, that's an evolutionary thing that we had to kind of go with. Um, you go...

Peter Amidon Well, just a brief on gender. We always did gents and ladies when I was a kid, you know, in the 50s. We chose our own partners. We didn't have a broad palate. Helen Shaw didn't, but she was a really great teacher. And even though that's all we did and all we did was square dancing I remember actually, that I always danced with Heather Keith. I still have a crush on her. I don't know where she is. And so the ritual

was, we'd push all the desks to the sides and I would hide under my desk and Heather Keith would come and drag me out. And that was just our little thing that we did.

But in my teaching with kids, I first taught playing the accordion—unless I was doing singing games—and playing the accordion. And so they were just dancing on their own and that worked okay. But then...oh I know how it happened. So I was doing these residencies and I was teaching with the accordion and I realized that when I left, they had instructions for the dances, they'd done the dances, but they didn't have the music. And so I said to Mary Cay and Andy and Mary Alice, I said, "Why don't we make a cassette tape of these dance tunes so I can have something to leave behind?" And as we kept talking he says, "Well, why don't we make a book to go with it?" And then, you know, "Well, what do we call it? We should call it Vermont Dancing Masters. No, let's call it New England Dancing Masters. So that was the genesis of our New England Dancing Masters.

But my point is that then I had these recordings and I realized that if I actually, instead of playing my accordion, use the recordings, then I could dance with the kids. And it was so much more effective. For one thing, I think the best thing about it was that I was modeling having a great time, because I love to dance. And so that was that, again, that was my most important job. But it's all the other aspects of teaching while you're dancing. I actually do that often with adults, even sometimes in a contra dance, but certainly in any kind of community dance. I have a wireless headset and I call from the floor and it's just...I can demonstrate things and I kind of feel the pulse of the crowd. But mostly I'm kind of just joyful. And whether it's adults or kids.

So I learned that, so when I did residencies, I would always use recorded music and I'd always have a wireless headset and I'd always dance with the kids. And my goal was just to reach a point where... So it's kind of a little bit different than what you said. It's like, I tried not to be a dance leader. I tried to be a dancer. I tried to just be like one of the kids. And the best time would come when I stopped calling, and often nobody would be saying anything and we would just be grooving with this really great music we had. So you know, we had Andy and Mary Cay and David Kaynor and Mary Lea and all these really wonderful...Keith Murphy and Becky Tracy. And then later on, we made a CD with Popcorn Behavior, with our sons Sam and Stefan and Thomas Bartlett. And I just love that music so much. Of course, my own kids' music, and it was kind of cutting edge. And I would just be really, really happy. And so that's kind of like...that's really my teaching method is to just teach them as efficiently as I can while I'm dancing with them and just having a great time.

Why dance and music with kids?

Mary Wesley Yeah, wonderful. I want to...you've mentioned a little bit the genesis of the New England Dancing Masters. I didn't quite have that picture that all four of you were sort of respectively just in the scene with your own classrooms, your own students, and sort of pulling together this experience and resources. And then, you know, as you

started building that business eventually and creating more and more resources and making more ways for more people to connect with and be able to do and experience what you were all doing and experiencing as teachers, how did you think about its value? I mean, it comes through so clearly, just hearing you talk about it, your passion. But how did you talk about it to other people? What was important and valuable to bringing this experience to kids and teachers?

Peter Amidon Well, I'm going to come to that in a second. I'm going to just talk about how the process was—and I think this is actually important to your question—we'd choose the dances we were going to do. And then we'd have to write them down and make the recording. So Mary Cay was in charge of the recordings, and that just kind of goes without saying how great they were. And that's, I think, one of the reasons that we were surprised at how successful they were... We actually didn't do any publicity ever. We just printed them. And somehow this big education company, West Music, found out about us and they started letting people know about us. And within a year, or two years, the Chimes of Dunkirk, which was our first collection, was all over the country. We didn't know that was going to happen. But I think one of the reasons it was popular is because the music was so great.

But the other process was actually the writing that Andy and I did. And I think Andy's a very good editor and he's really great with grammar and making things really clear. I really wanted things to be interesting and, you know, dynamic. And so that was a kind of a really wonderful tension that we had when we'd sit there at the computer writing the descriptions. And what was really great was that, you know, he'd write something, maybe I'd write something that's really, it was exciting, but not very clear. And then he'd write something that was kind of really clear, but not very dynamic. And then when we'd come up with a sentence that was right, we both say, "Yes, that's it." And so that's part of that, I think one of the reasons that...a lot of teachers have told us that it's just very clear. You know, the instructions are very clear.

The communication, I think it was just the strength of the tradition and the fact that all four of us were so deeply immersed in traditional dance. We had so many good models and so many good mentors. It wasn't something we thought about consciously of, "How are we going to communicate this?" It was more just that the tradition is, you know, is so strong. And I think the experiences we had working with both adults and kids, and a lot of time with kids informed the books and the recordings.

Mary Alice Amidon And then I think over time we began doing the workshops for music teachers all over the country. First it was more the Orff and the Kodály, which are the two sort of broad educational ones that use folk music as resources. But then gradually the music teacher organizations for every state would have us come. So Peter and I did almost all 50 states except for—we were trying to count this morning, which ones we didn't go to—where we would fly, and then they would have people from around the state come in for the whole day—clinicians, they called us—and do a workshop and we'd have the hand out. So therefore it would get spread out to thousands of children and many, many schools. And people often had our book. They'd

say, "I have that book and that book and that book. I'll get this one." But they wouldn't even know it was us because our pictures weren't on the cover. And we became the face of the business. And so I remember on the plane, though—when you asked the question of letting people understand what this is. Some woman next to me in the plane was like a big banker, a corporate kind of job. And I told her what we were doing and she said, "Dance in the public school!?" [laughter].

And I had danced in sixth grade, actually, the Red River Valley, I remember that in gym class. But I also had taken, by the way, ballroom dancing lessons where I had to wear white gloves when I was young. Anyway, I guess just we became...and one year Andy, Mary Cay and I went to Texas, which is big. San Antonio for their Texas, a big national thing. And that was amazing, you know, we'd always get to see marching bands and choirs. But we were the only people doing dance in the schools. So that was a niche that we were able to fill.

[Audio clip: [Peter leads his class of 8-10 year olds in the traditional playparty game "The Noble Duke of York" to the New England Dancing Masters recording from their "Rise Sally Rise" CD at the July 2022 Country Dance & Song Society Ogontz Family Camp.](#)]

Approaches to teaching

Peter Amidon And it just goes still—to that original question you asked about how do we communicate, you know, the kind of the meaning and importance of this. And I realize that when I was teaching kids, it was self-evident. There's just the joy of dancing. I didn't have to really say, "This is...you know." I didn't have to say anything. You're having a really meaningful experience now. They just were and they loved it.

But when we started doing workshops with music teachers, we started developing a language about the philosophy of what we were doing. And I, for example, to that thing I said earlier about the importance of modeling, joyful dancing by dancing with the kids and being more or less an equal with them. I also kind of started to think about choreography. I realized that what I was doing when I was leading a dance, was just trying to make the choreography be very beautiful. Because the more beautiful the choreography is, the deeper the joy and experiences of the dancers with children and with adults.

So, for example, when you're promenading in a circle and then you go from a promenade to take hands and circle left, a lot of stuff happens there and it can be really messy, and it makes the dance less fun. But if everybody just is promenading, and I'll teach this very specifically, and then they hang on to their partner and they stop walking, and they hang their partner and they face the center. They take hands—such that in the very first beat of the next time through the music, everybody takes that first step to the left at the same time. You almost want to weep when everybody does that at the same time. So I think that's a good thing to talk to adults and children about, about beautiful choreography. Whether it's even for a forward and back or a do-si-do. Phrasing to the

music. I don't get too fussy about it, but I will stop the dance and, you know, work on that aspect of it, and they just get it. Especially, you know, kids...most of my experience has been...I did call contra dances for ten years and that was always very important to me there. But I think the kids, I had more time to work on them. And the music teacher workshops also.

And sometimes we'd make up a dance together. We had this the way I'd make up a dance with the teachers. I did this with kids too, and it was basically I would figure out what formation they wanted, often a circle mixer was a good thing to do. And then we'd talk about all the different figures. Do-si-do, circle left, circle right. They'd say them: "What's another figure? What's another figure?" Forward and back, right hand turn. And then I'd just say, "Okay, what should we do first? And what should we do next?" And then do it that very basic way. I tried to use their ideas as much as possible, but I also tried to facilitate them into a dance that had some flow to it.

And I said, for example, I'd say to them, the best thing to do often is the most obvious thing, and the really common figures. If you want to do a unique figure, make something up that you know hasn't been done before, that's great. But you want to kind of space that out between, you know, all those kinds of choreographic things. And some of the dances the teachers made up were so good that we ended up, you know, doing them at family camp. You know, there's maybe about ten dances—that are some of my favorite dances—were actually made up by kids or by teachers at those workshops.

Play party games

Mary Wesley So great, so great. And Mary Alice, I kind of want to...I haven't talked too much about "play party games" on this podcast and it's, you know, it sounds like it really became your bread and butter and something you're really drawn to. And I'm just curious to hear from your perspective a little bit more about what defines that genre. You know, it's clearly something you've included, maybe for us it's really good for certain age groups. But can you just talk a little bit more about what that form is?

Mary Alice Amidon Sure. I envision it in circles, either holding hands and moving with characters in the middle, or still and sometimes telling a story. So with characters like in Thorna Rosa, there's the Princess and the Witch and the Handsome Prince. Or there's some nursery rhymes that have been adapted to singing games. But, you know, just teaching basic dance concepts like circle to the left, like "In my old brass wagon, you're the one, my darling. That one, and circle to the right, two-hand turn, into the middle, do-si-do. And it's that simple. But the music, singing of it makes it great. Or, Going to Alberta, which is a more uptempo, Going to Kentucky is the original, both as a play party where someone's in the middle and they turn around and turn around until you make a stop. And then the person in the middle gets to run out and that person goes in.

But also it's been adapted into a polka dance where you polka with your partner and there are people polka dancing in the middle. That's a nice way to introduce ballroom

position. Old King Glory in the Mountain is one that's just so satisfying—and "We all sing Glory to the Mountain," is the original—where one person's on the outside, everyone is circling left and the outside leader is walking the opposite direction. And it says, "And it's one, two, three, follow me." Number three leaves the circle and follows and it just starts again. And it's just beautiful, self-perpetuating dance.

And then some of them are in lines like Alabama Gal, where you could just sing it without any accompaniment. "Ain't I rock candy," you know, "Come through in a hurry." And there's sort of an empowering thing about that that you don't need a band. I mean, I started off like Peter and Mary Cay and Andy playing accordion. We all four play accordion and can call, but it's great just to be able to dance and sing with the kids and encourage them to sing as they're going. Square dances that don't need accompaniment that you can sing. For example, "Old Bald Eagle," square, "Sail around, daylight is gone," which is forward and back across the floor. Very pentatonic, usually singable catchy tunes. Yeah, really a nice balance.

Mary Wesley Yeah, I hadn't thought of that aspect of just being able to be the band. And, for yourselves, that sort of autonomy that it offers. And it also seems to me like it sort of gives you multiple dimensions, in a way. That you're singing, you're moving your body, there's storytelling and a much more kind of tangible way that's all all brought together.

Mary Alice Amidon Celebrating rhythm. Sometimes there's dialog with the person or just chants that get called out. But it's the repetition and the rhythms that are so catchy and it's so playground focused in a way. It's something naturally kids have always done.

Helping people love dance

Mary Wesley Yeah, and in some ways they might not even realize that they're dancing a little bit. I mean, something that I am always fascinated by is when you encounter kids, or even more often, I think adults who think that they can't dance, or who have this block about dancing. And, you know, some of it is maybe a perception of dancing as sort of a performance thing. It's self-conscious, but like, what do you make of that when you run into that reticence or fear?

Mary Alice Amidon Yes, which we often do in family dances, where the parents are going to sit off to the side while the kids dance. But no, we make the children go get their parents, for the first dance, at least for partners. And the kids usually know the dances ahead of time. And so they're empowered to teach their parents the simple tasks. It does require good teaching to make it simple and basic steps and not scary for people. But a dance like Sasha! or something that's so compelling for people. Or La Bastringue or even, I was amazed how kids and parents could learn Black Joke, well we call it "Hey, ho, diddly dum. But that is a, you know, Circassian circle kind of progressive thing. And I would just be amazed that even little ones in a circle of four with help from adults, it could work.

So yeah, reticence. In our culture we're not really used to this kind of thing. And that's why I find it's been interesting trying to bridge CDSS and public schools, public education. And I think it's still a challenge in a way, how to do that, because teachers and schools are so focused on other topics. But in music classes it seems to be...some phys ed teachers will encourage dancing. But even they can be intimidated by the musical forms and structures of it.

Mary Wesley "Dance in public school," right?

Mary Alice Amidon And yet, remember when "self-esteem" was sort of a big thing? There was a personality growth and education component. And we realized that dance had so much to do with all those things you're trying to do. Social skills, politeness, asking, "May I please have this dance?" "Yes, thank you." Somebody feeling empowered just by having a partner that they liked. And I don't know, it just was...striking eye contact with people, touch with people in a way that made it safe. That you wanted the kids to be comfortable so they could go out in the community and be good citizens.

Peter Amidon And I'm going to just talk a little bit about gender and about the development of the gender issues and "gents and ladies" and dancing. So I learned, as I mentioned before, we always did gent and lady dancing when I was in elementary school with Mrs. Shaw. And of course, when we started dancing in the 70s, it was mostly, you know, it wasn't...I don't think it was ever any problem if two guys danced together or two girls danced together. But it really was all called with gents and ladies. And that's what we taught in elementary school with older kids. You know, we wouldn't worry about it with the younger kids. But maybe say fourth, fifth and sixth grade. And if there were too many boys, you'd have a couple of, you know, a partner with two boys, or vice versa.

But, in terms of breaking through the reticence, what I would do in the beginning is I would actually... The very first thing I'd do with, say a group of fourth graders who hadn't danced before, is, I learned this from Andy, I think, or maybe he learned it from me. But I'd have all the girls make a circle in the middle and all the boys make a circle around the outside and then the girls kind of, back up into the space behind them so that it's more or less gent/lady, gent/lady all the way around. Because often the hardest thing is actually holding hands, and the hardest part of holding hands for some kids, or maybe most kids, is holding hands with an opposite gender person. So there they are with either one or both sides being the opposite gender. And then I would just do this whole thing about, you know, you make a mitten like this, put the front of your mitten on your neighbor's mitten, thumb lightly on the back. And then let go, take hands, let go. You know, to make it a kind of a joke and just an exercise. And, basically kind of break through that barrier, that potential barrier right away, right in the beginning.

And, I think it's...I'm completely in favor of the gender free things that are happening now because of the issues that now we're more aware of. I think that's really great. But I

do think this...just getting kids to learn to hold hands—once you do that, then they can dance. Because if they're reticent about holding hands, then they're... And if you kind of make it not a big deal by making it into something sort of mechanical, like a little game, then they can...then the dance will be successful from the beginning. So I think a lot of the stuff, I would talk about posture with kids. I would just say, you know, just have your shoulders relaxed and I'd find some kid that has beautiful posture and say, look at this. Look how relaxed the shoulders are. Everybody, we're going to call this the "Jimmy posture." Everybody do the "Jimmy posture." You know, that kind of thing. Because I think posture is really, I learned early on that posture is a real key to good dancing. You know when kids circle left, they often kind of pull. But if they have good posture, they're not going to do that. And I'll talk about it in positive terms of posture, instead of, "Don't pull." And that seems to, you know, those kind of tricks and keys really, really help them dance more beautifully. And hence have a more deeply joyful experience.

Mary Alice Amidon Also, just to get an ease with the dancing he would, well both of us would put on music and have them clap on the downbeat or, you know, try to feel the parts of the music then and learn about that, which I think helps keep everyone, "we're a team here, we're going to move exactly together as much as we can." And even one person who doesn't hold hands or, you know, is going to affect the whole group.

Peter Amidon And that's why, when you reach that point, dancing with kids, where you're not calling at all and the dance is going really well, the whole class is in tune with the phrasing of the music, that's amazing when that happens. Because of course, when you call, as you know, you define the phrasing of the music by the way you call. But when you take that away...and I certainly know this at a contra dance, but when you do it with children it's just such a wonderful experience, especially when you're dancing with them and you feel like we're all experiencing the same thing. They get it. They get it. They just, they really...I always think that children can have, you know, the same experiences that adults have, pretty much.

Mary Wesley Yeah. I'm sort of thinking of like a binding agent and baking, you know, like the thing that's going to hold the raw materials together. So you're really kind of pulling those out for the kids. How do we physically connect? How do we connect to the music? What's the rhythm? And then, then you bake the cake.

Peter Amidon And with kids, you don't have to talk about it. You just do it. I think with adults, maybe they can respond more and maybe even need more of the talking about it. With the kids, it's just more a non-verbal learning for them.

Mary Alice Amidon As well as things like clapping and stamping and things that keep us all together. Like in Heel and Toe Polka or, you know, the patty cake part of it, or Sasha! or something where you have the words that really define...or the actions, I mean.

Peter Amidon And that reminded me that when I'm like, if I'm teaching the heel-and-toe polka and some kids aren't quite getting the heel-and-toe exactly right, I don't worry

about that. I don't worry even if they're not walking...I don't worry about that, I just kind of keep it going. And of course I'm dancing with them and it's a mixer. So I get to teach each kid when I'm with them. And eventually I think that's just to say, I don't worry about it if some kids are not there yet. I just know that they will get there eventually, most of them.

Supporting teachers

Mary Alice Amidon We also decided since we were getting feedback from some teachers, "Well, I couldn't possibly do dancing with my kids. I don't see them that often," or...I don't know. So we made a book called "Nine No Fail Dances for Children," which was really successful through the GIA Publishing Company. "Alabama Gal," is the title. Yeah. "Nine No Fail Dances." And so I think that is really helpful for people who want to just say, I don't know how this is going to go. It might be chaotic, but these are ones we just know are going to work. And it's partly that definition of the music in the sections of the dance that make it really clear. The hooks.

Peter Amidon And it has the instructions and it has the CD, but most importantly in a way, it has a video that goes with it. So they can see us not only doing the dances, but actually teaching the dances with the kids. That's really helpful. I was in a camp, I was at Lady of the Lake camp, a traditional dance and song camp, and this one woman, I didn't know she was and she said, "Are you the one that made that great teaching video about how to teach dance?" And I said, "No, I have never made anything like that in my life!".

But then it put a bug in my ear and Brad and I, Brad Foster, he was a former executive director of the CDSS, Brad Foster, collaborated on making a teaching DVD. And Garrett Warner was the videographer, who is the son of Frank and Ann Warner, who are the people who started, you know, they were the first people I think to do... For years they did the Pinewoods Folk Music Week back in the 50s and 60s. So it's great to have the videographer be, you know, just deeply involved in traditional music. And now we have a...there's a guy named William Doublestein. He's a classroom teacher in the Midwest and he'd never been to a dance before, but he used our materials and he danced with his kids and somehow he just knew how to do it. He just totally had the spirit. He made all these videos of his kids dancing these dances from our New England Dancing Masters material that are just terrific. They're just terrific. Part of it is he's just a joyful human being. Bow Tie Music, it's called. Yeah, it's called Bow Tie Music. So actually most of the videos up of our dance, actually he's done. And we actually now work with him. He's sort of an adjunct professor, more or less working with the Dancing Masters because he does such spectacular work, not only modeling great teaching, but also archiving it and putting it up for teachers to learn the dances.

Mary Wesley I have certainly encountered those videos. And yeah, I can put a little link in our show notes to that wonderful collection.

[[Peter teaches "La Bastringue"](#), a traditional French Canadian circle dance to some fourth graders in a clip from the New England Dancing Masters DVD *Chimes of Dunkirk - Teaching Dance to Children*.]

Mary Wesley Yeah, so then I'd love to hear a little bit too, about dance leading and calling outside of the schools, because you also did that to Peter. You mentioned you...

The Amidon Family Tour and calling for contras

Peter Amidon I did. So what happened was—Sam was 15 and Stephan was 12—we took the kids out of school for the whole school year, and we traveled around the country and then England and Ireland at the end. And we were a dance band and we did concerts. And so let's talk about dancing. The dances were...I was the caller, Mary Alice played piano, Sam played fiddle, and Stefan played percussion. And I was not a contra dance caller then, but I just put out the word that I was!

Mary Wesley Tried and true.

Peter Amidon You know, that's how you learn, right? So on the big long trips, I'd be memorizing my contras, you know...circle to the left... do-si-do...you know, memorizing all these different dances. And that's how I became a dance caller. It was kind of rough at first, but I got pretty good at it. And it was really interesting, I'm really grateful again to my mentors from Pinewoods, all these great dances. The first dance we went to, the one we met at, it was Ted Sannella, who was a great caller.

Mary Wesley And you said that was at the Y?

Peter Amidon At the YMCA in Central Square in 1975, yeah. And he's just...if you walked in and saw him calling, you wouldn't know he was a great caller because he was just so sweet and, you know, it wasn't about him at all. He just, you know, but he was a really, really great caller. And when I called contra dancers, Sandy Bradley was that style of calling, which I really, I love, too. And for all the work we'd done actually with children, and writing the books with Andy, I felt like I really knew...I remember one thing I heard George Marshall said: the first thing you say is **who** is going to do it? And then you say **what it is.** So instead of saying, "Swing your partner," you say "Partner swing," "partner do-si-do", you know, that's some of the calling tricks.

And I felt like I would practice the walk through, I'm sure you do this too. When I was practicing a dance I would go on these long walks, I practiced the walk through, how I was going to teach the dance most efficiently. Sometimes you teach not the first part first, but the more difficult part first, and then back up. And then I would practice calling it "thick," where you just call like a patter call, and practice calling, like just one or two little calls, you know, before you stop calling all together. And it was really pretty fun to call dances for people who are mostly good dancers who really could lean into the music.

And I have to say, Montpelier was really my favorite dance to call. Montpelier has...sometimes there's funny things that happen in an adult contra dance where some of the dancers are thinking less about the community than they might. And that's a whole other podcast we're not going to do right now! But let's just say in Montpelier that was so not the case. People were very generous and enthusiastic. And John Crumb is very eloquent. John Crumb is a dance caller, he works with kids a lot and he's a great square dance caller. He lives down in the Philly area. And he has really this way of talking about how when you're a dance caller, you take on this responsibility for the whole hall. It's your job to do that—you don't have to apologize for that. It's your job. So if you see something that's happening on the dance floor that means that maybe some of the dancers are having less than a great experience, it's your job, if you can possibly do it, to help them make that better.

I mean, one of the big issues, of course, is the long center set and short side sets. And the beginners tend to be on the side, you know. But there's a lot of dancers who really understand that their generosity will make the whole dance better for them, you know, if they think about the community. And that was really a lot of what I thought about when I was calling adult dancers was just how I can...and I think other people...I know there are dance callers like George [Marshall], for example, and who was when you said you interviewed from Boston?

Mary Wesley Lisa?

Peter Amidon Lisa Greenleaf, you know, just a master of really being in charge in the most wonderful, wonderful way.

Mary Wesley And what made you want to try on that hat? I mean, it was kind of the family band experience?

Peter Amidon Yeah, well it was kind of a necessity for that trip. But I'd always thought about calling contra dances. I just didn't have any...but that kind of got me, I got enough skills through that experience. I really love to contra dance and I felt like it was really fun to try out some of these different hats that other dance callers had done. Different ways of making it successful. It was hard, though. It was like, you know, you just travel, it's late at night, and we have an early schedule with the kids. And so I actually only did it for ten years and then I retired from it because it just didn't fit into our life, which is more based around the schedule of an elementary school.

Mary Alice Amidon And I could also say, a good caller—and Peter had so many of the skills: making people laugh within 20 seconds, being an emcee, being confident, and having a math brain. And he also insisted on memorizing all the dances. I mean, most callers have a card there—I would I think! But he just also had a way of finding the hard parts of the dance, teaching that very, very well in the walk through, and then by the time he came to that in the dance, piece of cake. And that worked out very well. And so

he had certain dances...he'd have us in the car, he'd hand me a list of his dances and tell me to pick one. And he'd have to...it was so boring, I can't tell you...

Mary Wesley Drill!

Mary Alice Amidon Drill, drill! And just pick a dance and...but he really did know them in and out and was able to visualize. He had that kind of brain. So I think it does take a lot of different skills to get up there and do that and problem solve and things like that.

Peter Amidon And I'm just a total choreography nerd. I always have been. I really love modern dance. I played piano for dance class in college. And I really, really, really love modern dance and ballet and beautiful choreography. So it was really fun to find dances that had good choreography—ones that really worked, ones that were really exciting for the dancers, you know that flowed. And so partly, that was actually probably the biggest pleasure for me was being able to kind of enter in this world of more sophisticated choreography and leaning into that with the music.

Mary Wesley Yeah. And do you remember at the time where you were finding your dances and building your collection?

Peter Amidon There was this guy, who it's probably just as well I don't remember his name, who—without using anybody's permission—put on the Internet like, 500 dances or something like that. And I downloaded all of them.

Mary Wesley Ahh the Internet.

Peter Amidon And that was the foundation. But then I'd go through them and I'd pick out ones I thought would work. But I remember, you know, I remember some great...Rick Mohr is a great, he's a brilliant choreographer. Steve Zakon-Anderson, Gene Hubert! I thought Gene Hubert was, you know, I thought because he had so many dances, they were such classics, I always thought he was probably 85 years old. And it turned out he was like, I think he's younger than me, actually. He died young, I think. But he was great, his were really clean and intuitive, but brilliant just in the simplicity. And then there's other people who composed dances that were just more complex, but really, really interesting. And yeah, I'm really, I'm a big fan of the new choreography that people do and bringing in figures that are from squares and bringing figures that are more from English country dancing. And all I care about is the choreography.

Mary Alice Amidon I think a good flow is another thing. Flowing from one figure to the next is important. But also we would be at so many dances, at the Dance Flurry or one called Terpsichore, and Christmas [Country Dance School] in [Berea,] Kentucky and Ashokan. And so as soon as we had done one, we'd say, "Oh, that's a really good one." We'd go up and write that down and remember it by heart, you know.

Mary Wesley Yeah, that's always the most fun way to collect a dance is when you get to do it and you want to keep it. And I am someone who benefited from your long

thinking and your wisdom. I can remember coming and sitting down with you. I don't know what it was like 12, 15 years ago.

Peter Amidon So how old do you think you were? Were you like, 22?

Mary Wesley I was in my 20s, yeah, something like that.

Peter Amidon That's what I thought. I was quite flattered at the time.

Mary Wesley I said, "Peter, will you tell me about being a caller? What is this all about? How does it work?" And if I dig through my papers, I bet I have... I remember you had a print out for me of something. I don't know if you had written it or if it's something you'd used in other workshops or something like that. But there was some, you know... I love looking through those old things that I collected. You know, it was a time when I was just signing up for any caller workshop or little moment I could get to kind of learn a little bit more.

Peter Amidon Yeah.

Community Dances

Mary Wesley Yeah, well, and then, I mean, I feel like, you know, "community dancing" is also just kind of a thread through everything that you've done. And you know, it happens kind of organically at the end of your residencies, but you're doing it at camps and in your community here in Vermont. But how do you think about the community dance space? And I guess there I'm thinking of, you know, dances that are intentionally open to all ages and supporting sort of, all experience levels rather than a contra dance where contra dancers go maybe coming in knowing a little bit about that particular dance form. What's a community dance?

Peter Amidon Well there's so many different kinds of community dances. And I think there's, you know, there's the community dance where nobody in the room has any dance experience whatsoever, children or adults. And you can't, you just can't do a dance that's too simple in that case, you know? You can just have a circle left, circle right, lead them in a spiral, you know, everybody...February birthdays go forward and back, that kind of thing. We've learned a lot from Pourparler. Pourparler is an incredible annual national conference on teaching dance to children. People who come to it, some of their music teachers, some are actually full time dance teachers in elementary schools, which is pretty amazing. Just a few, mostly, I think private schools have that. And some people are just people who are interested in dancing, who are occasional family dance callers. Quite a wide range. And Sanna Longden started that, and she's kind of our New England Dancing Masters counterpart with International Dance because she...basically her career was working, doing residencies in schools and producing publications from dances around the world. And she's the one who started Pourparler.

And Brad Foster, again, the former executive director of CDSS sent me a flier once and said, "I'm going to go to this thing, it's in Chicago." So I said, "Well, if you're going, I better go." And Sanna Langden and I just fell in love, even though our repertoires did not overlap even a little bit. When we talked we were just doing so much the same thing. We had so much the same philosophy.

So we get together with all of these different kinds of teachers who have all different kinds of experience for four days. And I felt like I didn't really...there's a lot of repertoire you could get from that. And I actually didn't...that's not what I came back with. I just felt like whenever I called after that or worked with kids after that, I just felt like, "Wow," just for some reason I felt stronger and more clear and more effective. And I think the reason for that is because when you work with people, with a group of people who are other really devoted educators who work with children a lot, you kind of figure out why, why we dance with children. And that is what makes you kind of a better teacher. The deeper you understand that. I actually forget what your question was, but then I kind of got off on this Pourparler thing.

Mary Wesley I was just asking about, sort of the general category of community dance.

Peter Amidon Oh yeah, so then another dance, there's a community dance where you have a series where a number of people do come. Like Andy Davis has this fantastic series and now Louisa Engle has picked it up. So that's a case where maybe, you know, two thirds of the people have come before and they're familiar with the dances and that's really great. Then there's the community dance that we did mostly, which was where the kids, we've been dancing with the kids in the residency. And then the parents come. And that's what I have most experience with. Where you know what dances the kids know. And you tell them to go choose an adult partner, their mother or their father or some other adult for the first dance. And what I do in that situation as I actually keep them dancing together with that same partner for at least 2 or 3 dances so that the parents just get out there, get comfortable with the dancing and they're in there. And then you can, at that point, you can make it into some kind of mixer or something.

But in all those cases, in the community dance, Mary Alice was talking about the humor thing. I don't really...humor just kind of comes out, it's more situational humor rather than telling jokes. It's just like you're saying what's happening. And if something goes wrong, you know, that's the funniest thing of all, you know, [laughter] "Wow, that was great!" You know but just being, you know, more than an emcee, but a cheerleader, you know. That makes it sound a little bit cheesy to me, although I was a cheerleader in college, but just being a, you know, being very positive and happy and joyful and letting them know that they can't make any mistakes.

Mary Alice Amidon I've heard of other models of community dances, which are very rare to me in general. Weathersfield, Vermont has one that the model, I heard from Mary Cay Brass, is 6:00 to 8:00 and then a potluck/schmoozing time after, visiting time afterwards. 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. And also that there's a body of kids who are kind of middle

elementary who are like nine, ten years old. They all dance, all the boys, everybody. They're just in the culture, I guess, of their parents who are musicians, a lot of them. And then in Philadelphia, John Crumb probably started a lot of those, but Rick Mohr and Chloe and their son Evan have really created a nice group down there, and I don't know the details, but I think that's wonderful when it can work.

Mary Wesley Absolutely. Yep, I interviewed Rick a few episodes back and got to hear a little bit about dancing with a teenager, now that he has a teenager in the house, how do you get teenagers to dance?

Peter Amidon I've talked to him about that too. I think that's so great. And I think they should spread that news far and wide. Getting specifically...and that reminds me that, one thing that can happen, if you have a few community dances in a school is say, "OK all the kids are invited," and all these little kids come because their parents say they have to come or whatever. But, you know, there's all these little kindergarten and first graders, and then a fourth grader walks in and he sees all these little kids and thinks, "This is a little kid thing." So one thing you can do to combat that, and it's similar to what Rick and Chloe are doing, is to say, "This is a dance for the fourth graders. This is a fourth grade class dance," you know. And that way they're with their peers. And they can have a really wonderful time that you can only have at a community dance.

I just remember a lot of the dances we've done after our residencies, parents who had not experienced anything like that before, they'd say, "This is the best activity our school has ever had," and I'd like to take credit for that. But it's really the dancing. It's the dancing. And other and other comments I often get is just, "Why don't we do this more often? We should do this more often." So they really...they get it, you know. When they go they really get it.

Fond memories

Mary Wesley I'm wrapping up. I always ask, is there anything that we didn't talk about that's, you know, bubbling to the surface, related to any of this that I just may have missed?

Peter Amidon I'll say this: aging—dancing and aging. Because I'm 75 years old now. I can't...I really...contra dancing sort of hurts. [Laughter] You know, a little hip thing, little knee thing. And so I understand now why English country dancing attracts older people. It's a really wonderful for all ages. We've both always loved English country dancing. But it's true that actually I can more successfully do that, you know, with the limitations I have. So that's certainly an interesting phenomenon, that kind of age thing.

Mary Wesley Yeah. Dancing in all life stages. It can be done!

Peter Amidon That's right. That's right.

Mary Alice Amidon I guess, and this is back to New England Dancing Masters and schools, but we just did a...we came out of retirement to do a reunion kind of workshop for the New England Orff Music Educators Association. And that was a special event. Because of Covid, we had to cancel 4 or 5 workshops that were scheduled and then realized that we would just be too old to go on in two years whenever they were going to reschedule. But this one was very special, just about a month or so ago in Boston area. And it started with Peter calling Blaydon Races with about a hundred teachers and Mary Cay and Andy and I in the middle playing accordions. And we all just felt so happy. And it was very satisfying to feel this whole legacy that we have created that's ongoing in these books and CD's. But just the beauty of that very unusual moment of everyone laughing and holding hands and singing and just responding to the music in such a natural, live way, which seems so rare in our culture. And that whole day of the workshop felt incredibly rewarding.

Peter Amidon I have this very strong memory, I mentioned it briefly before. In our community when I was about 13 years old we went—in our little town we got on the bus and we went Christmas caroling to some of the shut-ins. And the bus was filled with about 50 people or something like that. And then we, then we drove over to Goule Farm and there was hot chocolate. And this guy was calling square dances with his accordion, and we'd just been singing outside in the cold, cold weather. And now we're inside dancing. And I remember I think I danced with Terry Stevens. And then I went over and I was having a cup of hot chocolate. And I just remember as a 13 year old thinking, how could I be so happy?

[[Peter and Mary Alice dance and sing the Lorraine Hammond singing game *The Tree Song*](#), which can be found in New England Dancing Masters' book and companion CD *Down in the Valley - More Great Singing Games for Children*.]

Closing

Mary Wesley I usually close with three questions and so you can just answer them as you will. One little record I have been making as I talk to different callers is to ask about dance notation. Because, you know, dance callers are sort of like collecting, notating or organizing their repertoire. And, you know, I've seen everything from binders to note cards, to now there are apps and databases. So that's been a little nerdy curiosity of mine. And so for either of you in any of these settings, do you have any kind of notation systems?

Peter Amidon I use "Panorama," which is a database program, and I put them on to Panorama, and I have little notations about the, you know, whether they're easier and whether they're beginner dances or—this is mostly for contra dances—and all the information, who wrote it and also a few notes about the music. And it makes it really easy to put together a dance list for a dance. You know, I can also...I have a record of...I would always print out all the dances I'm going to do. So I print out from the database, make a list of all the dances I think I'm going to do for a nice program, the first half, the

second half. Start with something simple, you know, just all those things we think about. And then I may or may not do them in that order or even do those dances. But it sort of just helps, because I always felt like that was important. The database also really helped me memorize the dances because I'd go through, pick out the ones that I haven't quite known yet. But that was the way, it was with a foundation of a database.

Mary Wesley Nice. Mary Alice, do you have any of your various...

Mary Alice Amidon I mean, I've kept all my little notebooks, which were very, you know, hand sized from my 30 years of, you know, teaching and residencies in schools and traveling. But because mine are so much singing based, I guess they would be just things that I would...or I'd use a recording and I'd just quickly be able to remember the calls if they weren't that complicated.

Mary Wesley Right, you could just get them into your head.

Mary Alice Amidon Yeah, I would never try calling a real contra dance.

Mary Wesley I bet you could do it.

Peter Amidon Absolutely.

Mary Wesley Wonderful. And then my next question kind of comes from thinking about stepping up to the mic, stepping into the role as sort of the leader, and then stepping out. And so I'm curious if you have any kind of pre- or post gig rituals or anything that you do to kind of step in and out of that space. And again, you do so many different kinds of things...

Peter Amidon I remember when I first called community dances, I was always terrified before. Not terrified, but scared and nervous about the dance. And my technique was to...you know, I was comfortable in the classroom, but then all of a sudden there's a big room full of many more children and all these adults. And so my technique was to treat them all like third graders, you know? So all of these people are third graders, except that the tall ones don't listen quite as well as the little ones. [Laughter] But generally speaking, once the dance started, I just kind of got in the groove, just totally got in the groove.

So I think the ritual I had with contra dances was when I made my list, I would really like... I mean, as Mary Alice mentioned, I'd memorized them. I would really memorize them. I would go through all of them and practice the walk through and the calling once they started dancing. And that just made me more confident. I felt like the thing about memorizing is that I just feel like then I can just really be much more in touch with what's happening in the room and, you know, not be distracted by this piece of paper between me and the dancers.

Mary Alice Amidon Now he does poems instead, and he has 150, including 35 Shakespearean sonnets that he works on. So that's different.

Mary Wesley Still memorizing. Amazing. And Mary Alice, do you have anything that you do before you get in front of a group?

Mary Alice Amidon Yeah. Well, I'm thinking of all the millions of school assembly programs we did, and that was...luckily, I have a lot of physical energy and joy in me. So I'm usually so happy to be out there doing what I'm doing. I just, if anything, just stretching and walking around or putting on music and dancing to it to kind of just loosen up and make sure that I have a good sense of what I've got coming up in that time. And afterwards, taking down our sound system and packing the car and going out for a meal and thinking, "I'm so lucky!" You know, "Freedom!" Because I was a kind of hyper kid in elementary school. And I think one of my goals is bringing joy into places that I found challenging as a person. And I just feel like I can bring joy and light into these situations. Now, at the Guilford Church, I can do it there. But it's a natural way for me. So it would be a sense of relief when it would be over, but full of energy too.

Peter Amidon I think one of the things I tell myself all the time in those situations is to slow down. Just to slow down and take your time, you know, and that benefits everybody.

Mary Wesley Definitely. Wonderful. And then my last question is my little sort of sociology experiment. But I'm curious, as people who take a role and interact with large groups of people, do you think of yourselves as an introvert or an extrovert or somewhere in between? What's your sort of self-understanding, if you know?

Mary Alice Amidon A very good question. I never saw myself as somebody that would be up on a stage. But I do find that children are so clearly showing you how they're feeling about something, whereas adults, they could be loving you and look really bored. Or they could be really critical and smile. So I always found that...but I would perform in front of a thousand strangers. But a room full of friends is a whole other thing. And I don't know what that tells you about introvert/extrovert, but just your peers.

And on New Year's Eve every year we do a concert with our kids in town, and everybody I know is out there, and it was very nerve wracking for me. But once I get in the groove, I feel like it's almost a spiritual thing. Like I have a presence that can come through when I just let go of that stuff and that's pretty nice when that happens.

Peter Amidon Mary Alice is more comfortable with 1 or 2 people, you know, in a social situation. And I do fine with that, but I'm very comfortable with large groups of people. And I play the fool sometimes, you know, just...but I used to be quite shy when I was...well not quite shy, but pretty shy when I was...even in college or through college. And then I got a job as a mental health worker at McLean Hospital for four years. And I learned about active listening. And so, for example if someone's just kind of talking on and on, to me, I would just kind of feel kind of trapped but not know what to do. And

then I learned about active listening to say, "What do you mean by that?" Or change the subject or just, you know, to get some kind of clarification so that it was a deeper experience for both of us. And I think that really turned me into more of an extrovert.

And that has to do with actually, that has to do with reading the room, which is a really important job for anybody who's working with any kind of group of people. But certainly in a dance calling situation, whether it's a contra dance or a community dance, kind of just reading the room, figuring out what the...and it's something that I've even ever talked about in terms of dancing before. But I think it's something you do naturally better and better as you get more experienced, getting a sense of the room and what will help the people have as good a time as possible. If you have really experienced dancers, you can just...you don't have to talk a lot. You can just kind of start calling and then stop calling soon, and that's your job. And, you know, the family dance it's a completely different thing.

Mary Alice Amidon I will say that I've always thought callers had a really hard job, though, because adults like to be so in control and would, you know, come up right to the stage and say what they thought, and get angry as if this was like, the most important thing that ever happened. And then one time I remember Rick Mohr at the Flurry said, "You know, I can hear you shouting at me. I know what you're saying. Don't worry. Don't keep shouting at me." And you just have to have a very thick skin.

I remember Becky Tracy saying that George Marshall had this smile, that people would come up to him to criticize, and he would just smile and say, "Oh you're so right." And he'd just, you know, forget it. After that he was probably rolling his eyes. And, you know, some bands like Wild Asparagus who people probably wouldn't dare, you know, criticize them, but because they have this sort of masterful way and they're so experienced. But I'm sure there are other places where callers who are inexperienced are really vulnerable. And whether the sound system is always a problem, you know, and then newcomers coming in or a whole camp walks in the door like that. And I think a lot of people don't even know who the caller is. They don't care. They just want to dance and you know, they're barely aware of who the band is sometimes. So that's a hard thing.

Peter Amidon I just have to say, you probably experienced this, too. I was calling a weekend down in Texas and it was Friday night, all day Saturday and I've been calling, calling, I was the main caller. And Popcorn Behavior was the band. And Sunday morning, we were having breakfast and this woman across from me said, "So where are you from?" I said, "I'm from Vermont." We were in Texas. "I'm from Vermont." "Oh, you came all the way down here for this weekend?" She was like, yeah...

Mary Wesley Of course. Yeah. Or someone asks you to dance at the, you know, do the dance after the break. And you're like, "Well, I'm kind of busy," you know. Yes, it's fascinating because you're simultaneously sort of the most visible person in the room. And then you can become invisible in a second. And usually you become visible when something is going wrong.

Peter Amidon But I think a lot of dancers really do notice and appreciate the caller. I think that's more...we notice those exceptions, I know I do a lot, you know, just very aware.

Mary Alice Amidon For me there's a nice style of Steve Zakon-Anderson, who just always is on the dance floor, walking around with the mic like he's at a party. And it's like two in the morning and, "Let's do this one now." Whereas then other people have a lot of command. I think of Will Mentor has got a real persona or charisma with young people in square dancing and he's up there and he's kind of part of the entertainment in a way. So there's a real range of types of calling.

Peter Amidon I was at Pinewoods one year and it was Sunday night and the week started on Saturday night. But Fred Park came late. The great, late Fred Park. And I remember I was just over, I was in the Camp House and across that little valley, there was the C Sharp pavilion. And I could hear some calling and everything else. And all of a sudden, Fred Park's voice came on there. And the whole atmosphere of the camp was transformed by his incredible presence. It was just amazing.

Mary Wesley Wonderful. Well, and I believe my first time dancing was at your "Camp Allegro" in the sixth grade. And, you know, I grew up in northern Vermont, but I have dear family here in Brattleboro where you live. And so one summer I came down to go to Camp Allegro, your kids music and dance camp with my cousin John. And yeah, we did this thing where we all danced together, and I had a partner that I danced with, and we held hands and we danced, and all the things. And, you know, I didn't circle back to getting involved really with contra dancing until after college. But, you know, it's those little touches that can come back for you. So it's really fun to sit and talk with you. Thank you so much.

Peter Amidon You're welcome. It's our pleasure.

Credits

Thanks so much to Mary Alice and Peter for inviting me into their home for this interview! 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