

# The Contra Connection: Producer/Caller Dialogue

by Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl and Ted Sannella

Consider a dance series that features a variety of callers and meets often enough to have a distinct personality. The dance producers or organizers will have ideas of how they want their series conducted as well as traditions for handling the logistics of running the dance. Dance callers offer a wealth of skills and material, not all of which are consistent with the producer's vision. So, it is in the interest of both the caller and the producer to find the portion of the caller's repertoire which will best suit the vision.

Our discussion will be from the point of view of the producer/organizer, who is usually expected to take the responsibility in initiating a dialogue with the caller.

## Setting the Tone

The producer can set the tone for open communication in the way he or she approaches the caller. Is he flexible with regard to scheduling? Is he forthright when discussing the difficult issue of pay, rather than leaving the issue unraised? Does he describe the series to the caller? Does he ask what the caller feels are the special skills and views that the caller might bring to the series?

## Following Up

After suitability to perform and a date have been established, what more should be discussed?

Here's what we do in the Thursday Night Dance Committee of the New England Folk Festival Association (NEFFA): When most of the bookings for a three-month cycle are set, we mail a schedule, with proposed billing, to the performers asking that they notify us of any changes and misspellings in the billing. This mailing also puts in writing the terms that were mostly oral up to this point.

Later, we send them the series flyer (both as a courtesy and to show the public announcement), a form letter reminding them of the financial arrangements, an offer of overnight hospitality, information about the sound system, an invitation to discuss our expectations, a reminder to call us if their plans change, our phone numbers, and, if necessary, a map to the hall.

## A Few Written Guidelines

Finally, we have recently supplied an informational piece to callers. Although parts of this piece are specific to our series, we offer it here to serve as an example of what might be done:

## Caller Info for the VFW Thursday Series

We naturally want each caller to make the best possible impression; it's in our own interest. To that end, we feel that a dialogue between the caller and the Committee may help the caller to get a well-appreciated reception. As a basis for such dialogue, we address a few questions a caller might pose. If you wish, Committee members would be happy to talk with you about our vision of the series, perhaps in the context of a proposed program.

### What Can I Expect?

\* A hall with good acoustics, wood floor, stage, piano, and sound system operated by the Committee. It comfortably holds six contra sets of 16 couples. As you face the dancers, the floor slopes slightly away from center on your right, is reasonably level at the front on your left, but slopes strongly away from center at the rear on your left.

\* Usually between 130 and 170 dancers including a few beginners. We do not have announced or regular formal teaching.

### What Does the Committee Expect?

\* An evening that can reasonably be characterized as a typical urban New England style contra dance. This might be exemplified by the calling of Steve Zakon or Ted Sannella featuring dances such as those composed by Gene Hubert. The remarks below should also elucidate our expectations.

\* A dance that starts on time (we are open by 7:15) and runs at least till 10:55 but not past (say) 11:05.

\* A fair amount of neighbor interaction, especially early in the evening.

\* So long as the caller presents such an evening, the Committee invites the caller to express his/her individuality.

### What Do the Dancers Expect?

That's a little hard to say but we can try to detail the range of features which characterize the well-received dances. So we give:

### Characteristics of Well-Received Dances

\* Between 11 and 13 slots no more than four of which are not contras. (Note: A slot is usually one called dance sequence; consecutive dances done with the

same personnel are a single slot; "couples" dances do not count as a slot.)

\* Slots that are shorter than at some series. Our dancers are used to being asked for lots of short sets for, say, unequal dances.

\* A short waltz before, and a short dance (usually a hambo) after an intermission of about 15 minutes, and a waltz to close the evening. More couples dances are not proscribed, but the dancers do not expect them.

\* No more than one or two dances so challenging that they seem a struggle. (The dancers are not expecting a workshop.)

\* No more than one mixer. Only rarely does the caller ask dancers to keep (for the next dance) the partner with whom they end a mixer.

\* Beginners to be "swept in" with very little formal teaching. (The experienced dancers will help as each new action comes up.)

\* Every, or almost every, slot to have a partner swing. (We are reporting expectations of dancers, NOT Committee policy!)

### Remarks Based on Our Experience

\* The dancers polka to a sound check at or before 8:00. There are plenty of dancers, almost all of whom are experienced, to start doing contras promptly at 8:00. Additional dancers will want to join during the first dance so it is better to start with two or three modest sets than one of more than, say, 10 couples.

\* As at most dances, the dancers are reluctant to leave a middle set for a side set. If suggested by the caller, they are usually happy to form a new set near the middle.

\* An occasional dance medley may add a lift to the evening, but should not be overdone. (Musical medleys are the norm.)

\* Squares and other non-contra formations are perfectly acceptable to the dancers and the Committee. However, the dancers are less familiar with the calls and conventions particular to squares.

\* Occasional brief remarks which give additional insight into the dance or dancing are acceptable or even welcomed so long as the dancers do not perceive them as needless teaching or lecturing.

\* Our experience is that a caller whose reputation in Boston is not well established is better advised to offer a well-prepared program of standard material rather than using individualistic material.

### Nomenclature

\* The usual "star" is done with wrist grasps. If you want "hands across", say "hands across". "Hands across star" is likely to get wrist grasps.

\* "Neighbor" is our usual word for a dancer who, at the moment, is playing a part taken by a different dancer in each change of a contra. "Opposite" or "corner" are not usual for such a dancer.

### Additional "Food for Thought"

\* Larry has prepared an outline of some facets of calling. This is an update of material in his Zesty Contras. Although hardly anything on it would be new to you, it might interest you and it might serve as a source of additional dialogue. He would be happy to send you a copy at your request. ■

### The Connectors offer a few personal remarks on what you just read:

Larry Jennings: The first and last paragraphs are a compromise between two positions: 1) It is presumptuous and counterproductive for a producer to even hint to a caller that his or her choice of presentation methods and of programming could be improved through discussion with the producer, and 2) the producer does and should have standards by which to judge callers and he does and should be applying these while making his decision when to next hire a caller; thus it is only fair that he share these standards with the caller even if the process makes both of them slightly uncomfortable. I must confess that I tend more towards position #2, but many people whom I respect favor #1.

Dan Pearl: I'm curious if readers think that the printed piece oversteps the bounds of what should be shared with callers. I hope that the way the piece is presented ("Here's stuff that our dancers have been trained to expect") is not perceived as a thinly-veiled "Here is what you had better do if you want to be invited back again". Although we invite the caller to express his or her individuality within limits, do we actually allow enough room for individuality?

Ted Sannella: One of my biggest gripes with dance producers is their (sometimes) failure to communicate freely with callers. Okay, I have been hired to call for your group for the first time. I know where to come, the hours of the dance, and the financial arrangements. I have the name and address of the band leader so I can obtain a tune list. What I need to know most is, what kind of group can I expect to find and what is expected of me? Sure, because of my long experience I can usually pick up the pulse of the crowd after one or two dances. It would be so much easier if the producers let me know their preferences and the expectations of the dancers in advance. I remember one dance I called where I was introduced with magnificent rhetoric which ended with "and Ted will surely give you a terrific contra medley as I promised you last week." This was news to me and I had no such medley planned!

Through a series of leading questions, I have learned to find out most of what I need to know. However, even when I ask for copies of all preliminary advertising for my event, they seldom get to me. Most

often, my contact is not the person handling publicity and the message doesn't get passed on.

We have given an example of an information document to be given to guest callers. I urge each group who runs a series to develop and use a similar piece suited to their own situation.

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The CDSS office has copies of the aforementioned "Your Invitation to Contra Dancing in Greater Boston," produced by NEFFA, which contains the map referred to, and Larry Jennings's update of his Checklist for Callers. If you want them, send us a SASE along with a statement of what you are requesting.

As always, CDSS welcomes your comments and suggestions for discussion topics to be passed on to the Contra Connectors.

*Callers Larry Jennings, Dan Pearl, and Ted Sannella live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles to help organizers and beginning callers. "Producer/Caller Dialogue" is the 17th article in the series. Reprints of this and earlier articles are available at \$1.00 each (plus shipping and handling).*



## Personal Ads and Announcements

The big ROUND SINGING book, gestating since the mid 80s and featuring hundreds of excellent rounds, old and new, should be out by the Fall of 1993. You are invited to send last minute info on rounds, composers, unusual rounds, etc. to Sol Weber, 25-14 37th Street, Astoria, NY 11103; 718-278-4389. Thank you.

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RICHARD AND MELANIE POWERS of Cincinnati and (currently) Palo Alto announce the birth of Nathaniel Cody Powers on February 28, 1993.

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JANE STASSER and RIDGE KENNEDY were married on March 20 in Somerset, NJ: "The bride arrived to the strains of *Well Hall* and the couple first waltzed to *Amelia*. The ceremony, home made, the banquet mostly pot luck and we'll tell you lots more when we see you."

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MOVING TO WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS? I'm seeking a female roommate to take my place in a large, beautiful 2 BR apartment in Northampton. Sunny, porches, storage, walk to town and CDSS. \$325+. Available June 1 or September 1. Ann Pearce, 413-584-2190 or 584-9913.

## Training Materials Reminder

In the last issue, we asked for readers to think about sending us handouts, worksheets, booklets, notes, outlines, treatises, ideas that worked and ideas that flopped, etc. for a collection of leaders/musicians training materials as a resource for future programs and to help others in training.

CDSS Board member Erna-Lynne Bogue is the point person on this project. She reports we have so far received: an illustrated guide to operating a sound system, a series of handouts describing basic figures for dancers, and guides for teaching steps.

This is a good start. Send your material either to the CDSS office, 17 New South Street, Northampton, MA 01060, or to Erna-Lynne at 8700 Silver Drive, Pinckney, MI 48169-8919. Erna-Lynne's e-mail is ebogue@umich.edu1992.

We're looking forward to your contributions.

## Ready, Aim...Dance!

"Meanwhile, the army was losing time. Sturgis got the rest of his division across and sent the 21st Massachusetts up front—a battlewise regiment which had educated its officers under fire and was proud of it. They had gone into action for the first time some months earlier at New Bern, North Carolina, where they had had to cross a shallow stream in a swamp with Rebel bullets whacking in all around them, men getting hit and everybody pretty tense. One of the officers had been a noted fiddler back home, much given to playing for country dances at which, in the custom of the day, he would call out the movements for the dancers while he fiddled; at this river crossing he became greatly excited, so that pretty soon he was skipping about shouting all sorts of useless orders as fast as he could think of them, jittery himself and making everybody else the same way. So after a while one boy piped up: 'All promenade!' and then another called out: 'Ladies—grand change!' and the regiment crossed the stream, shouting with laughter. The officer became quiet and said a veteran, 'behaved like a little man' for the rest of the war."

*Thanks to CDSS member Steve Corrsin who shared this with us — it is from Never Call Retreat by Bruce Catton, and describes an incident during the battle of Antietam during the American Civil War.*

