

The Contra Connection: Booking a Caller

by Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings

Ted Sannella: With an ongoing dance series, the job of booking a caller may be handled by an individual or, perhaps, a committee. What considerations must be weighed during the decision-making process?

Finances, for one, can be very important. An out-of-town caller will cost more than one who is local. If the series is one of many within an active dance area, outside callers can be booked for a number of dances with a cooperative arrangement among several groups, each paying the prevailing rate and all sharing the cost of travel expenses. It must be decided whether or not this extra effort is warranted. Will the traveling caller attract enough additional revenue to justify the risk? Is the group willing to sustain a potential loss? If the answer to either of these is yes, then do it! How often, is another matter. Perhaps an occasional outside caller will add variety to a program that features local callers in some sort of rotation, or one regular caller who needs a night off now and then. An isolated group, lacking the opportunity for cooperative booking, may be unable to afford outside talent. Their best bet is to encourage the development of local callers. This encouragement could go as far as financing a trip to a dance camp with a callers' class.

Local custom may dictate the booking arrangement. Some groups feature multi-caller evenings. Perhaps no one of them has the experience to handle an entire program, but together they can do the job. This open mike approach fosters a "we're all in this together" attitude, one which can result in a hit series as well as a potential spawning ground for new callers. Some groups use two or three local callers in rotation and are quite satisfied without distant talent, others feature one caller only and are similarly content.

In recent years, special events such as folk festivals, dawn dances, and residential dance camps have attracted dancers from afar. Here a large number of callers are on display in a sure-fire fun environment. Beware of mediocre performers who shine in a festive arena! A caller who excels in a short assignment with experienced dancers at a gala occasion may be a flop with a mixed crowd for a full evening. By asking around, it's easy to check out the reputation of those "terrific callers".

Despite the increasing prevalence to do otherwise, there is a lot to be said in favor of having a single "regular" caller who knows the crowd. Having a "home group" provides an opportunity to try out new ideas with the reasonable expectation of getting feedback. Also, the group will gain from the familiarity and togetherness which leads to a strong sense of community. Novice callers also deserve a chance. Although they may lack the judgement and skills best gained by experience, they often bring with them an infectious enthusiasm and a naivety that endears them to the crowd.

From the caller's point of view, the booking process can be reduced to three important words: *verify, confirm, inform*. A caller should expect that a booking will be *verified*, usually by phone. Occasionally, an eager administrator will approach a caller on stage at

a dance and inquire about the possibility of a future engagement. Such an inquiry must always be followed by a verification at a time when the caller can consult his log book and discuss availability and some preliminary details. One or both parties may decide at this point that this booking is not possible. If a tentative booking is made, it should be *confirmed in writing* as soon as possible by the sponsor. Ideally, the confirmation will include all of the pertinent details, such as date, location, hours, music, finances, P.A. system, hospitality, etc. It should list clearly the responsibilities of the sponsors as well as those of the caller. At some point before the occasion, either as part of the verification, the confirmation, or in a separate communication, the caller should be *informed* of anything he needs to know relevant to the expectations of the sponsor. Likewise, the organizers have the right to be informed of any appropriate desires, biases, or intentions on the part of the caller. Any disagreement between the two parties must be ironed out before the event to ensure an amiable understanding which is necessary for a successful engagement.

Dan Pearl: New callers often ask me how I got calling jobs when I was first starting out. Did I advertise? Did I run my own dance series? They are invariably disappointed when I tell them that I did none of those things. Larry Jennings gave me my "big break" back in 1979 by inviting me to call one contra during the evening of the NEFFA Contra Series. Perhaps Larry thought I had promise because he invited me to call one or two dances during the subsequent months.

So the answer is "I started slowly". As a new caller, your talent and experience do not match your enthusiasm and it is best to hone your talent in relatively safe settings, such as part of a multi-caller event. Once you get good, people will let you know. They also will hire you to call at other events. Nowadays, dancers and callers are very mobile. At any open dance there is likely to be some number of people from out of town, and they may be the people responsible for booking callers in their community. Phone numbers are exchanged and a caller gets hired. So callers establish their reputation in an ever-expanding wavefront from their home base.

Even if there is no multi-caller event in your community, perhaps you can persuade an established caller to give you a guest slot during an evening. If all else fails, you may have to run your own event. It may cost you some money, but it would be classy to pay the expenses out of your own pocket (and perhaps pass the hat during the dance). After all, you are a beginner caller!

There is no reason why your first public performance needs to be a demanding test of leadership skills. Invite your friends who are experienced enough to compensate for your mistakes. In return, ask them

for feedback on your performance. If the outcome is positive, then you are on your way to getting your name known as a caller.

There are other ways you can promote yourself. Often, certain folk-oriented organizations receive phone calls from people looking for dance leaders for one-night stands. If you are interested in this sort of event, let these organizations know you exist and they will be happy to give people your name and number as a referral. (Bear in mind that these events can be the most difficult for a leader.) Let them know if you have a special interest or talent that is worth mentioning to potential employers, such as expertise in ethnic dance, ability to use recorded music, etc.

If the opportunities don't come, seriously consider whether you are cut out for calling. Some people are personable and pleasant one-on-one, but behind the microphone, other less pleasing behaviors are revealed. If you find it hard to comprehend the dance sequences, don't have an ear for music, or you don't really enjoy the calling experience, you will find it an uphill battle.

Larry Jennings: Ted and Dan have approached the matter from their broad experiences as travelling callers. I would rather emphasize the importance of the producer as the spokesman for the group concerned about the future of the local series. I urge this group first to formulate as well as possible their vision of where they hope their series will be in a year's time. I further suggest that they then do everything possible to find talent which can assist in this quest and to communicate their views to this talent. Let's examine a few details.

No series can implement a vision without adequate attendance so consider the desirability of booking a

well-known caller. This may attract more dancers. However, choose your well-known caller with care. Verify for yourself that he is capable of working towards your vision. Do this, if possible, by going to some of his dances. Or talk to others who can assess his strong and weak points. Finally, either before or after booking him, discuss your vision with him and see what agreement you can come to toward achieving that vision.

Not many series can afford a well-known caller for every dance. In my opinion, the best action is not to settle for a second-rank caller but rather to do your utmost to develop first-rank local callers. Look for a dancer who dances well, has the respect of the group, and speaks with succinct authority. Such a person may have little interest in leaving the dance floor and may never aspire to being a travelling caller. Nonetheless, you may be able to persuade her to give it a try. You will be much more satisfied supplying such encouragement than to accept unquestioningly the offers of a caller whose motives are more nearly personal than for the success of the series.

Lastly, you may be able to search out, not too far away, a caller who has been developed locally but does not aspire to fame. Don't overlook the possibility that she might fit right in with your objectives.

In any case, be sure to communicate. It is your obligation to outline your constraints and expectations. The caller should be happy to do the same.

Callers Ted Sannella, Dan Pearl, and Larry Jennings live in New England. The Contra Connection is a series of articles written to help beginning callers and organizations. "Booking a Caller" is the ninth article in the series. Reprints of previous articles are available from CDSS; write for details.

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