

Talking About...Money

by Brendan Taaffe

Money, for many of us, is a taboo topic. It is certainly not a topic of polite conversation. And yet money underpins a lot of our decisions—how we eat, what we drive, how we recreate. So I'd like to start a discussion about money in the contra community. Since I'm a musician, I'll admit to a bias that comes from years of making my living as a musician.

If money is impolite generally, it is especially taboo for artists. Artists should be above money, after all, and there's a history of cultural perception that the purity of art can be tainted by money. Damien Hirst, the well-known British artist, is criticized as much for his commercial success as he is for the provocative nature of his work. And while I don't find his work beautiful, I think the question of how an artist can survive in the absence of aristocratic patronage or government support is a vital one that affects us all.

As a contra dance musician, I love putting music under people's feet and I love the energy that flows between the dancers and the musicians. But I'm playing fewer dances these days because my other musical life (as a composer and song workshop leader) provides a steadier financial footing. So, a look at the economics of being a full-time dance musician: for dance musicians, the pinnacle of achievement, both in terms of popularity and finance, is playing for the many dance weekends around the country. I've played a number of these with Magic Foot, and they're a totally fun deal. You get flown someplace new, play for a nice crowd of dancers, and then head home. These dance weekends tend to pay between \$500 and \$600 per person. This means a musician who makes dance weekends a full-time job would make \$25K to \$30K annually (assuming fifty weekends during the year). This hypothetical schedule would be incredibly grueling and entail as many or more hours than a full-time job: with travel, each weekend is a four-day experience, and you easily spend a day a week on administrative tasks (booking future gigs, taxes, etc.) when you're at home. Not to mention actually practicing.

Regular dances vary in how much they pay out to musicians. Two hundred dollars and up is widely considered a good night, so playing two dances a weekend comes in below (and sometimes well below) playing for a dance weekend. There are other things that musicians do to earn money—teaching, recording and summer camps among them. It is entirely possible to piece together a good life as a musician, though it definitely demands flexibility, a flair for self-promotion, and the ability to juggle the demands of different bands and gigs and teaching schedules. Oh, and never

having any health problems.

That's what it looks like from my side of the table. What's less clear to me, as I've been thinking about this piece, is how this information is useful to the dancers and organizers also sitting at the table. The many dances, weekends and camps around the country are independent groups, most often run by dancers and volunteers, all of whom have the best intentions. Which is to say, all of you reading this.

To me, this diverse structure is a huge strength and one of the most beautiful things about the community. But though each organization operates independently, there are consistent financial norms within the community—most dance weekends pay a similar amount and many dances have a similar guarantee. One obvious suggestion is that we move that community norm upwards. If dance weekends paid \$100 more per musician, that translates to another \$5K per year in my hypothetical schedule (\$200 more per musician would be even better). I suggest this realizing that increased revenue can only come from the dancers attending the weekend—not necessarily a group of people with large tax shelters in the Cayman Islands. The question is whether dancers would be willing to pay \$20 extra for a weekend if they knew this was going toward a cost-of-living raise for the musicians? That \$500 per weekend figure, by the way, has been pretty steady for the past fifteen years. In those same fifteen years, my grocery bill has definitely gone up.

At regularly scheduled dances, it all boils down to attendance. And attendance is influenced by myriad factors: the popularity of the dance series and of the band, the economy, the weather, the price of gas. In New England, where I live, there are a lot of dance opportunities.

These are some opening thoughts to a much larger discussion. Underpinning all of them is the assumption that having a group of dedicated, professional musicians is of value to the larger community. It's not the only way to get good music for dancing, but it does mean you have people with the time to practice, travel and play at the highest level they can. Which seems to translate to a good time on the dance floor. Thanks for listening.

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