

# All Join Hands

## *Dispatches from the world of community dancing*

• Shindig • Sit Squares • Solstice Swing • Urban Barn Dance • Barn Dance • Ceilidh • Chicken and Egg Dance • Community Dance • Downtown Dancin' • Contra Dance • Dances for Every Body • Dancin' in the Seats • Dancing Well • Family Dance • Farmer's Frolic • Folk Dance • Friday Fling • Hip to be Square • Hoedown • Hoolyann • International • Old Time Country Dancing • Old Time

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### *Organizing a Family/Community Dance Series, Part 1 by Marian Rose*

#### Introduction

Those of us who make a living as community dance callers often spend much of our energy leading events widely known as one-night stands (ONS): weddings, parties, festivals, bar/bat mitzvahs and the like. A smaller number of community-minded individuals take the plunge into organizing a regular series of dances in their home towns, another level of commitment altogether.

In this article and the next, we will be talking about the challenging, rewarding work of organizing a community dance series. It will include information shared on a recent CDSS-sponsored webchat entitled 'Family and Community Dance Organizers Unite!' as well as valuable input from members of the Pourparler online chat group. As you may imagine, the topic is vast, more than enough for two articles. This first one will present some examples of the kinds of dance series currently happening across North America and talk about the organizers' visions and their strategies for attracting dancers to their event. The second article, to come out in the fall issue, will focus on repertoire, music, and related happenings at the dance. Both the articles are based on contributions from the participants in the CDSS webchat as well as Pourparler members, and include series in large cities and rural towns in: Sebastopol, CA, Belfast, ME, Philadelphia, PA, Chapel Hill, NC, Bridgewater, MA, Dummerston, VT, and the Canadian cities of Calgary, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Smithers.

#### Vision

Most community dance organizers would agree that they aim to offer a welcoming event for dancers of all ages and skill levels, with an emphasis on fun and community-

building. Beyond this, it is important to have a clear vision of your own dance series. Do you want to aim specifically at families with small children, to offer an all-ages alternative to your local contradance scene, or do you prefer to create an alternative experience for young urbanites looking for a good time? In some towns, the focus is simply to provide a non-alcoholic, dance-centred community gathering, and still others have a goal of encouraging the local traditional music scene. Having a clear vision will help you make decisions about the many different aspects of your series.

For example, the time slot you choose will affect the people you attract. Dances may be bi-weekly, monthly or quarterly and can be held mid-week, Friday evenings or weekend afternoons/evenings. Most groups are most active in the fall/winter/spring, but some continue throughout the summer. Here are a few examples from the contributors to this article:

- 4th Saturday dance for families with children 0-12 years old. 4:00-5:30 pm
- 6 monthly dances (November to April) Sunday 2:00 - 4:00 pm, all ages
- Saturday evening dance (sometimes Sunday) for families with children up through 'tweens'. 6 - 8 times per year, avoiding summer months.
- Four Saturday evenings for all ages from 7:00 - 9:00: harvest (October), Christmas holidays, deep winter (Jan/Feb) and spring (March/April)
- Three times yearly during the school year for adults, Friday or Saturday evening.

Once you have settled on a vision and possible dates, the next important decision is the name of your series. Over the years and across the continent, much mental energy



Ottawa (Ontario) Family Dance (photo by Judy Kavanagh)

has been expended by series organizers to come up with a catchy name to represent the feeling and purpose of their event. Some choose the straightforward approach: Sebastopol/Delmar/Ottawa Family Dance, Bridgewater Community Dance or Second Saturday Square Dance. Others are more poetic: Calgary Old-Time Experience, Mount Airy Barn Dance, Albany Shindig, Old Time Dance Party, or First Friday Fling. The New England Dancing Masters opted to call their series “Village Dance” so that they could hold it in any of several venues in the Brattleboro, VT, area. Organizers of the Belfast Flying Shoes Community Dance in Maine felt it important to keep their group name front and centre, as they want to be known in the community as promoters of creative, participatory events. The Smithers, BC dances are sponsored by the local fiddle group, and so are always advertised as a Family Fiddle Dance.

## Finances

The hard reality hits when you start to consider the financial end of things. For most of us, the largest budget item is venue rental which can be substantial, especially in larger cities. A conveniently located, affordable venue with adequate parking, good acoustics, and a warm atmosphere is notoriously hard to find. We all hope for a funky hall in a great location, but in reality, many groups opt for church basements, community centres, or schools. Often it is difficult to cover the cost of rental from door receipts, so it is necessary to find creative ways to bulk up the budget. Some groups are supported by a sponsoring dance-related organization, or piggyback on the local contradance so that one hall fee pays for the afternoon family dance as well as the evening contradance.

Local sponsorships can be effective — health food stores, toy stores, outdoor supply stores and credit unions have been known to sponsor one dance or a series in return for having their logo displayed on the flyer and at the event. Let your supporters know that you are looking for ideas of other sponsors and/or donations toward operating costs.

Then there are the musicians and caller, who are central to the success of the event and often appreciate some remuneration. In an ideal world, they would be paid an amount that recognizes the years of effort they have expended in order to acquire their expertise. Unfortunately, our world is far from ideal, and musicians are often underpaid. Some current scenarios, each with financial and social consequences that must be considered:

- Hired band and caller. Both are paid handsomely
- Musicians are guaranteed a minimum. Rotating roster of callers
- Open band. No one is paid
- Open band. One or two people are paid to anchor the band
- Caller is paid, band is not
- Rotating roster of callers, unpaid

Further, the decision of what to charge at the door is based on your expenses as well as how you feel it encourages or discourages people from attending. It is generally accepted that free admission is not a good idea; human beings are thought to value something more if it requires at least some financial commitment. Approaches to this vary widely:

- Entry by donation – basket at the door
- \$2 per child, \$5 per adult, maximum of \$15 per family
- \$5 per child, \$10 per adult, maximum of \$30 per family
- \$3 per human being
- \$8 per person, discount for season’s pass
- \$20 per person, \$5 discount for those under 25
- \$5 members/\$8 non-members, children \$2 (no defined age)

## Promotion

Depending on your group’s criteria, a dance series can be successful and sustainable with only a few dozen dancers and will thrive as long as people are getting what they came for. Most of the series that are featured in this article

report that they have a core of 20-40% of their dancers who return each time and the rest are either one-time or occasional attendees. The reality is that we would all like to have a few more dancers on the floor, both to pay the bills and, more importantly, to contribute to that wonderful energy that happens when the hall is full to overflowing.

Pretty much every group reports using social media, email lists, and flyers to promote their events. Others go further and send out regular press releases to community calendar listings, blogs, and media outlets. Some feel that it is worth the money to buy space in the local paper or to boost the ad on Facebook. Especially in smaller communities, the media are happy to cover dance events as a 'feel-good' piece and may even come and film the event. Posters are still widely used but appear to be falling out of favour as other strategies prove more effective. Where the dance happens in a town that also has regular contra dances, there are often verbal announcements from the stage.

Finally, virtually everyone agrees that word of mouth is by far the best strategy. Once people have had a good time at the dance, they talk it up with their friends and encourage them to come. For this reason, it is worthwhile to reach out to groups like homeschoolers, Waldorf schools, hiking clubs, Christian youth groups, seniors and Guides/Scouts. People have been known to bring their whole birthday party or retirement celebration to a dance. It is a good idea to ask people to take flyers back to their communities and ask them to promote it there.

## Conclusion

Organizing a community dance series can be a valuable contribution to the life of a community, but it does come with significant organizational and logistical challenges. The next article in this series will continue the topic, focusing on music, repertoire, and non-dance activities that contribute to a successful series.

Contributors to this article include Sarah Lee, Rick and Chloe Mohr, Dean Herrington, Chrissy Fowler, Bruce Snider, Sam Baumgarten, Andy Davis, Jennie Inglis, Leslie Gotfrit, Emily Addison, Paul Rosenberg and Sue Hulsether.

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# Contra Dance: The Lowdown

by Alan P. Winston

For the Gillie Wheesels, San Luis Obispo Contra, Dance to Larry Unger's Lowdown Hoedown + Beth Cohen's Reel

Duple minor improper contra

- A1: Balance the ring, slide or spin one place to the right.  
Repeat.
- A2: Balance the ring; gents roll lady (partner) in front and step to the other side  
neighbors brief swing, face across.
- B1: Circle left three places, swing partner on the side, face across.
- B2: Ladies chain over to neighbor;  
ladies ricochet,  
gents ricochet, look for new neighbors.

Last time through, ladies cross back and swing partner on side.

Click on the screenshot for a YouTube video of the Gillie Wheesels playing the tunes.



David Foster-Evans: octave mandolin; Guy Wallace: guitar; Barry Johnson: bodhran; Judi Brown: violin  
Video: Terry Simons

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