



South Coast Folk Society contra dance, Green Acres Grange Hall, Coos Bay, OR, 2014 (Doug Plummer)

How to Photograph a Contra Dance

by Doug Plummer

There is no such thing as a photograph of a contra dance. The only thing we can capture is a moment in a dance. So the first thing is to identify that: a moment that might be captured.

Actually, let's back up. The first thing is to identify how we feel at a given moment. When we dance, we go through a series of fleeting emotions. There's the cordial greeting of a hands four. There's the ramp-up anticipation of a balance. The connection of an allemande. The dramatic feeling of a wall of you convening and receding in a great long line. The delight of a new neighbor. The alarming stare down contest of a gypsy. The consummation of a lovely, long swing with your beloved partner, until you dump her for the next dance.

When you watch a dance, those moments and feelings have physical expressions. There are bodies in contact and in connection that you can isolate and capture. That is the reason to have a camera at a dance—to more deeply connect with those significant, fleeting moments full of feeling, and to maybe stop and hold one.

So, given that, what do you do to take a photograph that holds all that ambition? The first trick is to watch for just a single moment that you emotionally connect with. Shoot only that. Thirty-two beats later, it comes around again. Keep whacking away. How you feel inside is your signal that you might be getting closer.

Here is maybe the most important advice to becoming a better photographer. Don't stare at the back of your camera at what you just did. Don't pay any attention to the results of your shooting. It only takes you away from the moment. All that investment in getting connected with the dance, with the dancers, with the beat and rhythm and the energy surrounding and carrying you away—look at the screen for longer than a second and

you've left the room. It takes great effort to reenter. Edit when you get home.

Another tip: get close. Get within elbow dodging range. Make people know you're there. Be engaged with them. If someone doesn't want you there, you'll feel it and you can adjust. But that rarely happens. Don't be a jerk, but don't feel you have to be a wallflower in order not to be one. Everyone notices the person trying to photograph unobtrusively. If you're in the middle, you disappear.

The first thing I tell my workshop students is, go forth and fail. You have great aspirations to capture the perfect moment, and mostly you won't. That's part and parcel of the creative process. You flail and you fail again and again, and then, you get a glimmer of something that's starting to work, and you chase that and see if you can do it again. It doesn't matter a whit what kind of camera you use. The process of creative growth doesn't care.

Photography, especially in the digital age, is an act of great profligacy. That's not to say that you shoot indiscriminately and without intention. Just the opposite. It takes a great deal of attention and effort to stay deeply connected with the moment, and from that connection comes the urge to click the shutter. It might happen a lot of times in a few seconds, particularly in the complex, dynamic environment of a contra dance hall, as a feeling hits. I rarely come away from an evening of photographing a dance with fewer than two or three hundred exposures. And I don't sit out that many dances.

And when you do sit at your computer that night, posting on Facebook? Don't post the two dozen variations of a single move that are pretty good. Post only the best one. The fewer shots you post, the better photographer people think you are. And it indeed makes you a better photographer.

Doug Plummer is well known in the dance community nationwide as that guy who takes all the dance photos and videos and puts them all over Facebook and in a calendar. Since 2012 he has self-published the Contradance Calendar, a premium wall calendar that captures the best contra dance moments from around the country. To get a 2015 calendar, support the Kickstarter campaign for it, <http://bit.ly/contracalendar2015>, which is live from now until September 11, or buy one from the CDSS store come November.

Contra dance, Bay Area CDS's American Week, Jones Gulch YMCA, La Honda, CA, 2014 (Doug Plummer)

