

Madison's Tuesday Night Dances—Fostering Talent for More Than Twenty Years

by Carol Ormand

photo courtesy John Peterson



Madison, Wisconsin, has a weekly Tuesday night contra dance, and it's one of my favorite things about living here. (We also have some Saturday night dances, but this article is not about them. Yes, that's right: in Madison, Wisconsin you can contra dance more than once a week.) The Tuesday night dance is open band and open mic. That has the potential to make it a less than satisfying event—see Luke Donforth's recent, excellent article about why ("On Open Stages," *CDSS News*, Winter 2013-2014)—but instead I see it as one of our greatest strengths. Running for over twenty years now, it has allowed us to grow an incredible pool of talent for a community of our size. On a recent November evening, we had seven callers and a dozen musicians in a hall packed with about forty dancers. Those numbers could have been even higher; there were a few musicians who chose to dance instead of playing that night, and one caller who chose to play music. What would those numbers be if you had the same proportions in your community?

Here are the keys to our success, from my perspective as a caller and musician.

Experienced dance musicians anchor the band. When I moved to Madison, a little over eight years ago, I joined the band. The lead rhythm player at that time was Bill Obermeyer, and he'd been the lead rhythm player for several years. He still is. He has probably played for more than a thousand evenings of contra dancing. I estimate that I have played fiddle for over four hundred evenings of contra dancing, and other musicians in the band are as experienced as I am. Bill and I are both in the band almost every week of the year, as are several other musicians who are also quite dedicated to playing regularly. The band is open to anyone, but this core of musicians who come to play every week forms a strong foundation for the band.

The band has a relatively short, accessible set list. We don't spend time trying to put together tunes or medleys on the fly; we play from our set list. It changes over time, but very slowly. When a new musician shows up, we provide them with sheet music (if they read it) and/or put them near a strong musician (if they play by ear). There's enough variety in the tunes to take the dancers on a musical journey over the course of the evening, but enough continuity from one week to the next that new musicians have a fighting chance of learning our repertoire in a reasonable amount of time. The vast majority of the tunes we play are on the easier end of the spectrum. We're not out to impress the dancers with our technical prowess on our instruments. We just want to provide good, solid, enjoyable dance music.

The band cultivates an ethos of playing for dancers. This may sound self-evident—it's a dance band, right? But there's more to playing for a dance than playing the notes on the page. New dance musicians aren't necessarily aware of how playing for dancing is different from playing in other musical traditions. So, we occasionally get together to talk about those differences and to practice varying how we play the tunes, listening, and responding to each other's musical ideas. We also practice playing the music to match the dances, emphasizing balances, or smoothing out phrases to match smooth choreography, for example. These gatherings also allow the callers in the band to talk about the caller's perspective and answer other musicians' questions about how the dances and tunes fit together.

One of our most experienced callers mentors and coaches new callers. Steve Pike started calling at the Tuesday dances about twenty years ago, and he still calls regularly. When someone expresses an interest in learning to call, Steve works with them to prepare for their debut. He makes sure that they understand the mechanics of leading the walkthrough and calling a dance, and he provides them with some appropriate dances. Then, in the most subtle manner I've ever seen, he stands near them the first time they call, ready to coach them (but only if a need arises). I've watched him manage some amazing on-the-spot coaching—getting a novice caller back on the phrase of the music, helping them spot and prevent a potential set breakdown, explaining how to let the band know when to end. And he does it in a completely supportive, unobtrusive way—I'm pretty sure the dancers have no idea Steve has done anything at all, so the credit goes to the novice caller. Pure awesome.

The band can choose tunes to match the dances without the caller's input, if desired. The band watches each walkthrough. Bill and I

know how tunes and dances fit together, and we have many years of experience choosing the tunes for each dance. This means that callers don't need to figure out what to tell us about the dances to help us choose the tunes. We welcome their input, if they have requests—we just don't require it. So that's one less thing for novice callers to have to think about.

There is almost always an experienced caller in the hall. There are usually several. So, if one caller is struggling (for any reason), or having difficulty connecting with the dancers, there is someone ready to step in, teach and call a dance or two to rebuild the dancers' confidence.

Cross-training. Several of our regular dancers have tried their hand at calling or playing for the dances, and all of the callers and most of the musicians are also dancers. We have several musician callers. The dancers as a whole are more sensitive to the music, and musicians are sensitive to the needs of the dancers and the dynamic of the dance. One side benefit of the size of our hall is that we don't need to amplify the band (even when it is small). This makes it easy for musicians to drop in or out of the band over the course of the evening.

It happens every week. Nobody—caller, musician, or dancer—need be a beginner for very long. I think it's easy to miss the importance of this. I know of many communities that have occasional open band and/or open calling events. But how is a novice supposed to get any real practice if that only happens once every three months? Or even once a



photo by Carol Ormand

(Book Review, continued from page 9)
fitting for a collection that celebrates someone whose best-known song, “Idumea,” asks, “And am I born to die? To lay this body down? And must my trembling spirit fly, into a world unknown?”

This is part of what Greil Marcus calls “the old, weird America”: that world only hinted at in the music school textbooks when they acknowledge William Billings as an American composer but mostly dwell on the fact that he wasn’t very pretty to look at. Which is fine, because pretty isn’t exactly the point of this music. It’s supposed to move you, and draw you in. Marcus, talking about Tennessee singer Clarence Ashley, wrote, “[this music] can be understood but never explained; because it can place the listener, pull the listener’s feet right out from under, but cannot itself be placed.” Or in the words of Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer:

The music is a house of glass standing on a slope;
rocks are flying, rocks are rolling.

The rocks roll straight through the house
but every pane of glass is still whole.

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(Madison, continued from page 11)
month? Having the opportunity to get experience playing or calling for live dancers every week significantly shortens the learning process.

The dancers support new callers and new musicians. The value of this, too, is easy to underestimate. Our community is absolutely fantastic. The Tuesday night dance is not without its rough spots. Every once in a while, we have a novice musician or caller who takes a little longer than average to develop their skills. While that person is learning, the dancers have a less-than-ideal dance experience each week. But the dancers don’t seem to mind. It’s clear to me that the community understands that their patience with novices is an investment in our collective future. If we want to grow new talent (and every community needs to

grow new talent, sooner or later), then we need to be supportive as people learn to play or call for dances. I absolutely love that the dancers here get this.

I was the beneficiary of this attitude myself, eight years ago: when I arrived here in Madison, I had played music for contra dancers exactly once before in my life, but I was welcomed into the band and encouraged to return. When someone new shows up with an instrument and I welcome them to the MOB (the Madison Open Band), I’m just paying it forward.

Would this kind of event work in your community? I think there are several key ingredients that increase the likelihood of success:

- A hall where you can dance every week. While I suppose almost any dance hall would do, I love the intimate atmosphere of our cozy little hall. With forty dancers, it feels packed. At the same time, that’s not as intimidating for newer callers and musicians as a larger crowd might be. We are, quite frankly, lucky to have such a hall with affordable rent.

- A cadre of callers who are committed to having at least one experienced caller at the dance every week, and to mentoring new callers. We don’t pay our callers, so this is a significant investment of time and is a gift to the community.

- A cadre of musicians who are committed to having at least one experienced rhythm player and one experienced melody player at the dance every week, and to mentoring new dance musicians. We don’t pay our musicians (not even the anchors), so this, too, is a gift to the community.

- A community of dancers who understand that they are growing the next generation of talent, as well as getting an opportunity to dance more often. Our dancers do pay to dance—we use the money to pay the hall rental—so they are literally paying for the pleasure of helping to cultivate new talent.

If you have these seeds, you have the makings of a phenomenal dance series. The Tuesday night dances in Madison make my heart sing. I’m so grateful to have landed in this community.

Carol Ormand has been dancing since 1985, calling since 1990, and fiddling for dances since 2005. Fiddling with the MOB on Tuesday nights is the highlight of her week.

