

# Gigs From Heaven

*by Carol Ormand*

I've been calling at dance weekends and camps since the early 1990s, and have called at many dozens of such events over the years. Some stand out in my memory as extraordinarily fun; others as candidates for the "Gigs From Hell" sessions Dan Pearl used to run at NEFFA. But it's only recently that it's occurred to me to share what I've learned, in the interest of helping anyone who wants to organize a dance weekend or camp to benefit from the experience of their predecessors. I should say right from the start that I have never organized such an event, so my thoughts are based only on my experiences as a caller and on conversations I've had with my friends (callers, musicians, organizers and dancers).

The worst weekends I've been to were each horrible in their own way, but the best weekends I've been to have all shared certain qualities. I'll try to articulate a few of them here, illustrating them with counterexamples.

## Fundamental Principles

1. **The organizers are organized.** They know what needs to happen, when, and they are on top of it. In some cases, a few individuals do everything; in others, duties are distributed among a large number of people. But someone coordinates everything—and I do mean everything.

*Counterexamples:*

- *The chief organizer asked me three days before a weekend what workshops I would like to offer.*
- *Another organizer arranged for a shuttle service to pick up the bands and callers at the airport and drive us to camp—but the drivers did not know where the camp was.*

2. **The organizers know what they want and hire the appropriate staff to deliver that.** I'm often astounded (but not in a good way) at the band/caller combinations I see advertised for weekends: very talented southern bands are paired with very talented callers who strongly prefer New England music, or vice versa. Why would you do that? Similarly, all too often the dancers, bands and callers are frustrated all weekend because of the sound system (or the person running it). Why hire the best in the country to perform without making sure they can be heard clearly throughout the hall? If you are not an expert on bands, callers and sound people, consult someone who is.

*Counterexamples:*

- *I was asked to lead a workshop on New England chestnuts—scheduled with a southern old-timey band. The organizer didn't realize that chestnuts have signature tunes, and that most southern bands don't play them.*
- *I've occasionally been asked not to call "too many" squares. If you don't like what I do, don't hire me. If you like what I do, please let me do it without interference. Honestly,*

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*it seems to me that asking me not to call squares is a bit like asking bands to play only the melodies, as written, and not to mess around with harmonies and improvisation the way they usually do. You're hiring me to do something I love, and then telling me not to use all of my talent.*

- 3. Having hired a staff that can support their vision, the organizers let that staff shine.** Usually the organizer accomplishes this by soliciting workshop ideas from the staff, then selecting those that best meet the organizers' vision for the event. (Occasionally the organizers will ask potential staff, prior to hiring them, whether they can provide a specific workshop.) Some of my favorite memories are from camps where I was asked to lead unusual workshops: an introduction to morris dancing, a geological hike.... Asking your staff what they would like to contribute to your camp can unearth some great possibilities.

*Counterexamples:*

- *I was sent a copy of the program for a weekend that the organizers had put together without ever asking me what I would like to lead. The program described the content of "my" sessions with language I would never use.*
- *Organizers hired two nationally known callers—one local, one not—for their weekend, but didn't schedule the local caller for any "prime time" slots. That's insulting.*

- 4. The organizers communicate actively (and proactively) with the bands and callers.** They let us know what their vision is for the event; ask us how we can contribute to making it happen; tell us about the schedule well in advance (and ask for our input on early drafts); let us know about any evening party themes or extracurricular parties; let us know when the hall will be open and ready for a sound check; give us directions to the hall, our host's house, or anywhere else we might need to find on our own; tell us what to expect for meals (and direct us to nearby restaurants if meals are not provided), etc.

- 5. The organizers take care of the bands' and callers' needs: transportation, meals, housing, and down time.** Most of my best weekend memories are from camps where I was pampered—asked in advance if there were any special snacks or drinks I'd like available on stage, fed very well, given the best accommodations available, and given a very civilized schedule. Thoughtful organizers make sure the band has time to eat, especially on Friday evening, when they are arriving from the airport, doing a sound check and so on. It's not unusual, at these events, for the organizers to provide dinner for the band and caller at the hall on Friday. These same organizers always let me know in advance what's going on—who will meet me at the airport, where I'll be staying, what my schedule will be, and so on. And they ask me if there's anything I'll need that they haven't mentioned.

*Counterexamples:*

- *More often than I care to think about, I call late in the evening both Friday and Saturday nights and am asked to lead workshops first thing in the mornings both Saturday and Sunday. Schedules are often similarly brutal to the bands.*
- *Bands tell me that organizers often fail to realize that it takes time for them to set up or break down for every session (not just at the beginning and end of the weekend),*

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*and that it takes extra time if there are multiple bands for the event. Many times, I've watched some of the best musicians in the country try to eat meals in bites during walk-throughs because the meal break was not long enough for them to eat and get set up for the next session. They're too professional not to be ready on time, so they set up first and eat if they can. That's no way to treat your staff.*

- *I've been asked (many times) on the way to my host's house whether I have any pet allergies. Fortunately I don't—but what would you do if I did?*
- *My carnivorous friends have been housed by vegans who don't allow meat in the house, and my vegan friends have been housed by carnivores who don't have any idea how to feed a vegan. It's not difficult to inquire about food allergies, preferences and needs in advance.*
- *Performers are often housed by the same generous people who host the after-dance parties. This is fine with some of us, but can make it impossible for others to get enough sleep to be at their best the next day.*
- *Organizers for one weekend simply assumed I would take care of my own transportation to and from the hall. The band for the same event had to email the organizers the day before they flew in, asking about transportation.*

**6. The organizers stay out of the band's way when they are setting up or packing up.** Musicians' instruments are their livelihood. If you want to irk the most easy-going musician in the world, all you have to do is touch one of their instruments without asking. If you want them to remain friends with you, let the band put their own instruments away before you begin to tear down the stage and sound system. Be absolutely sure that cables are unplugged from instruments before you pull on the cables.

**7. The organizers grant reasonable requests from the staff.** I called at a dance weekend where I saw that the local band included some of my friends, but I wasn't scheduled to call with them. I asked to work with them at least once during the weekend, and the organizers rearranged the schedule for me. (Thanks!)

**8. The organizers have reasonable expectations.** It seems like this should go without saying, doesn't it?

*Counterexamples:*

- *I was asked once to fly out of Chicago. O'Hare Airport is 130 miles from my house; the Madison airport is seventeen. If I did fly out of O'Hare, I would have to drive an additional 226 miles. Besides the inconvenience, consider the additional costs for me: driving 226 extra miles, parking at O'Hare (considerably more expensive than at Madison), and the additional time I would have to take off from work for the additional driving. I guarantee it's not worth it, both financially and because of how grumpy it would make me.*
- *I was asked to fly to one camp on Thursday, even though it didn't start until Friday evening, just in case of bad weather. I generally take most of Friday and Monday off to do a dance weekend; what I'm paid for calling typically just about covers my lost income from my regular job. If I took another day off I'd lose several hundred dollars on the trip. I love calling, but I don't love it that much.*

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9. **The organizers reimburse staff expenses without haggling.** Budget appropriately. Make conservative estimates, so that you don't have to worry about being able to pay your costs. There's nothing that sours my opinion of you faster than having to argue to get my expenses reimbursed.

*Counterexample:*

- *I've been told that my dinner expenses will be reimbursed, but to please limit the cost to less than \$10. If you're that worried about meal expenses, please provide my meals. Or you could charge each dancer \$5 more for the weekend and significantly expand your budget.... This was also the only weekend I've ever done (thank goodness) where I had to argue to get my plane ticket reimbursed.*

### **Above and Beyond**

Every once in a blue moon, organizers ask me for a list of my favorite bands to work with, or whether I have any preferences among the bands they are thinking of hiring. I find this absolutely delightful. While there are many, many great bands, I find that some are a better match for my style of calling than others, and I particularly enjoy having the opportunity to work with them. Of course, I met most of them through random chance, being scheduled to call with them before I knew them. But I sure do appreciate being asked for my input—and it's exceedingly rare. Most of my musician friends tell me that they are hardly ever asked who they'd like to work with, either, and that they really appreciate the rare exceptions.

### **A Final Note**

The best advice I have for anyone thinking about organizing a dance event who hasn't done it before is talk to people who have. LOTS OF THEM. Seek out organizers who've been running successful events for years. Ask them for their advice. Ask them if they have a list of tasks related to the event, and if so ask them to share it with you. Then talk to any bands or callers you know who've been hired at camps and ask for their advice, too. There's no need to reinvent the wheel.

*Carol Ormand is known throughout the contra dance community for her smooth and unflappable calling style, wickedly fun dances and penchant for keeping all the dancers smiling. For more information, see her webpage, [www.geocities.com/carolormand/](http://www.geocities.com/carolormand/).*

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