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Contradancing is Nothing New

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By Amy Singer

On Saturday nights, it doesn't take long for the auditorium of the Munson Library to fill up with laughing, shouting, foot-stomping contradancers. The dress is casual—there's none of the Western-style clothing of square-dancing—and while soft shoes tend to make dancing easier, many contradancers seem to prefer the sound effects of hard soles on the wooden floor. One man is there for diversion, another because it's "relaxing." A newcomer tells a friend that it looks like fun, but she's going to watch a few more dances before giving it a try. Two hours and many partners later, she's wondering if she can arrange her schedule to do this regularly. Another convert to the contradance craze!

You couldn't find a much happier crowd than these Saturday night contradancers in South Amherst except, perhaps, the crowd at the Sunday night dance in Brattleboro, or the Monday night dance in Amherst, or the Thursday night dance in Northampton. (And, if you're not too tired, there's also sure to be good times at the Friday night dances in Greenfield and Northfield.) Swinging and promenading to the direction of a caller, the dancers are partaking in the revival of a traditional entertainment indigenous to New England. Many of them don't think twice about dancing three or four times a week. Deborah Radway, president of the Pioneer Valley Folklore Society, is amazed by the devotion of contradancers. She gets calls from New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut: "People are coming to visit and want to know where the dances are. They never call about concerts. People are real fanatical about it."

Contradancing is derived from the "long-way set formation" of English Country Dancing, where two lines form with partners facing each other. When English Country Dancing was introduced to the European continent in the 1700s, the French, in their unwillingness to adopt anything too British, referred to it as "la contredanse." Contra-caller and musician Nick Hawes, who describes himself as a "*de facto* folklorist," suspects that Americans adapted the French term because "French manners were high-class." Such chic intentions seem to have failed though, since many people who hear the term for the first time assume it refers to some unstructured New-Age movement activity, interpreting the "contra" according to its more customary meaning of "against." Couples do dance "against" each other, in facing lines, but Hawes discounts this derivation as incidental.

Contradancing is often compared to square dancing, but the two are actually very different. The difference can be illustrated by the fact that contras were thrown over as being old-fashioned, in the late '20s, when square dances came into popularity. People wanted to couple rather than flirt, and contradancing is more conducive to the latter, since each couple progresses down the line, dancing one figure over and over with a new couple each time. In square dancing, on the other hand, four couples form a square and dance only with each other, deriving variety from dancing fresh figures.

The current revival of contradancing began in the '60s, when the "back-to-the-land" spirit was infecting people. Its popularity has spread throughout the country, mostly through the agency of homesick New Englanders. "The thing that made it mushroom," according to the theories of Dudley Laufman, contra caller and concertina-player of 32 years, "was that young people had their fill of rock-and-roll, where you didn't touch your partner much. Folk music was becoming popular, and people were into things that seemed sort of earthy, so they found contradancing."

Today, contradancing also provides a welcome alternative for people who want to meet others without going to a disco or singles-bar. Hawes likens contradancing to socializing at a singles-bar in that "it is very social, but there is progression. You can flirt like mad, and if it works out, good. If not, you don't have to see that person. You can experiment with socializing without any of the pressures. It's a tremendous way to meet people in a very safe environment."

And yet, there's hardly a "meat market" atmosphere at a contradance. "It attracts nice people, people with humane values," says Mark Kramer. "The people who come to contradances aren't cool, fast movers." Kramer is a writer and a contra musician who plays a "mongrel" instrument, as he describes it—a cross between a tin whistle and wooden recorder.

But while socializing may be an enjoyable sideline of contradancers, the main reason they're there, after all, is to dance. And perhaps the most important figure at a contradance is the caller, who sets the tone and acts as a host or master of ceremonies. Fiddler Barbara Stack, who gave up teaching and graduate study to work full-time as a musician, compares a good caller to a good teacher: "You have a whole room, and you have to have reliable, successful ways of dealing with it. A good teacher has the ability to teach everybody in the classroom, and for me, that's also the mark of a good caller. It's the caller's nature to have a real attentiveness to the crowd so that everyone has a successful evening."

Contras are always held with live music in a well-lit dance hall. This no-frills kind of setting contributes to an interplay between dancers and musicians—there's none of the alienating mystique that may exist when musicians perform under stagelights to a dimly lit room. "When we're playing well," high school teacher and contra fiddler David Kaynor explains, "the dancers get a real nice, extra swing in their step. They clap loudly. There's instant feedback. What I really like is to look out and see that harmony of movement. It's a transcendent feeling to see a hundred people in motion together."

There's a sense of continuity built into contradancing by virtue of its long history. The music itself has its roots in Irish, Scottish, English and French-Canadian music, and accommodates a wide variety of instruments, the most popular being the piano and the fiddle. When Kaynor plays, he has "a feeling of being part of an old, and growing tradition. It's neat that it's so old, but it never feels like it's getting tired, partly because of tunes people are writing that keep it going."

Says Barbara Stack, "I hope always to play traditional music. I'm going to be playing Saint Anne's Reel over and over until I die, and it's exciting, because it changes. My understanding changes, and there's always something new to discover. I don't play it the same each time."

Musicians and dancers who have travelled the contradance circuit claim that there's a kind of factionalism between dancers of different regions. "It's almost as though there was an iron curtain between us," says Nick Hawes, describing the customs of Eastern vs. Western Mass. dancers. "It's the typical distinction between urban and a rural situation. Eastern Mass. is more organized. They have a rules sheet on how not to offend anyone. They're offended by the Western Mass rowdiness. We're more rambunctious out here." The regulars in Western Mass. appreciate what Laufman calls, "a good, hot dance." All the same, beginners are always welcome and, indeed, expected. Instruction in the basic figures is often offered at the beginning of the evening, but Hawes claims "the easiest way to learn to dance is to dance. Contradancing is designed so that if you stick out your hand, someone takes it. So don't dance with a beginner. Go and look for the best dancers, and ask them to dance." □

Contradance calendar:

Every Monday: *Unitarian Meetinghouse, Amherst; music by Wellington Bilgewater; Cammy Kaynor, caller.*

Every Thursday: *People's Institute, Northampton; music by Peas on a Knife; Nick Hawes, caller.*

Every Saturday: *Munson Library, South Amherst; music provided by a different band every week.*

Every Sunday: *Green Street School, Brattleboro; different band every week.*

First and third Fridays: *Town Hall, Northfield; Cammy Kaynor and Four Gone Conclusions.*

Second Fridays: *Guiding Star Grange, Greenfield; Dave Kaynor and the Belchertones.*

[Information courtesy of the Pioneer Valley Folklore Society. More information can be obtained by calling the PVFS at 586-5285.]