Writing Dances ~ A Conversation with Erik Hoffman

by Evo Bluestein

Erik Hoffman attended contra dances in Santa Barbara, California in 1980 and five years later started calling. He helped incorporate Santa Barbara CDS and served on its board of directors. In 1994, Erik moved to the Bay Area and served on the board of directors of Bay Area CDS. He is a driving force behind the Bay Area dance scene and a well-known caller throughout the west. I've seen Erik completely at ease and masterful with a one-night stand of beginners and just as able to please a veteran dance crowd with advanced contras, many of his own pen. Curious about his dance composing process, I asked him a few questions. -- E.B.

EVO You've written a lot of dances. Why and when did that start?

ERIK It started a long time ago. The first memory I recall was going to the Bay Area CDS dance week at the Mendocino Woodlands—it must have been in 1984. There were a number of my mentors and gurus there: Sandy Bradley, Fred Park, Larry Edelman. Larry led a callers workshop. Among many topics we covered was writing new dances.

At that time, an evening of contra dance included square dances, circle dances, Sicilian circles, and others. Having Larry, Fred, and Sandy, as well as our local Santa Barbara caller, David Woodsfellow, as models, I too started calling squares. And, I was noticing that the rhyming rhythm of square dance "patter" and the then new rap music seemed related. So I made up a dance, "The Rap Square"; we did it as a joke at the end of the week. The following year, I was back at Mendocino where it was revived on the main dance floor. It has gained some notoriety over the years.

Then in 1986, besides being one of the regular callers in Santa Barbara, I became the house caller for the monthly San Luis Obispo dance. That meant a roughly two-hour drive to that town. During the drive, I listened to lots of cassettes I made of itinerant callers. Besides Larry, Fred, and Sandy, I had tapes of Steve Zakon, Bob Dalsemer, Sherry Nevins, Brad Foster, and more. I'd listen to their teaching styles, calling styles, and, of course, where the dances came from. Then I would find myself going on flights of fancy—what would happen if you did this, then that, then this? Thus, besides collecting dances, teaching ideas, and presentational jokes, I started making up dances.

Like many dance composers, I'd discover that I didn't understand some transition, so, when I finally got to test the idea, a big OOOPS! It failed to work; back

to the drawing board. Repeated tries did make me much more familiar with transitions, for all dancers. I started walking through dances in my kitchen, working through moves for men, women, ones, and twos. I think this helped a lot because now I can visualize dances from all positions.

EVO What is the process like for you? Do they jump out of you or how does it happen?

ERIK It varies. Sometimes I've been commissioned to make up a dance. Then I ask the honorees what their favorite moves are, and try to come up with a sequence that fits their desires. Here's an example.

Mendo Wanderer, by Erik Hoffman (composed for Chris Brooks) Contra, improper, June 1998

- All Allemande right neighbor, men allemande once; half hey, neighbors start (right shoulder)
- A2 Gypsy neighbor; swing neighbor
- B1 Circle left three-quarters; swing partner
- B2 Women chain; half hey (women start, right shoulder)

Other times I have a seed of an idea, and try to fit it into a dance. I've taken a dance to play a thought game—if I started with this, I'd like to do that—and come up with a dance. The dance "Curly Cues" is one of these. I was looking for a way to make "Chorus Jig" more equal.

Curly Cues, by Erik Hoffman Contra, proper, late 1980s

A1 Ones down center past one couple, mirror gypsy next, ones moving towards the outside (number one man right shoulder, number one woman left shoulder) all the way around; number one couple come up the outside to place, then cross set, out

the other side. All face down to make a line of four: woman, woman, man, man, with ones on the outside, twos in center

- A2 Down center four in line, fold (bend) line, twos let go of partner, ones join hands, so the line faces up with the ones now in the center, twos on the ends; return, hand cast to long lines
- B1 Ones turn contra corners
- B2 Ones balance and swing

And sometimes it's just a flight of fancy, or taking a tune and making a dance fit it. One time I was doing a gig with the Contrabandits, and they wanted to play the Monty Python theme song, "Liberty Bell." It seemed to have a phrasing that wanted a balance at the end of every part. I couldn't quite accomplish that, but came close with the dance "Flying Circus."

Flying Circus, by Erik Hoffman Contra, Becket, January 1999

- A1 Pass through to an ocean wave (short waves across, women in center, partner in right); balance; allemande right partner into long waves (men face out left hand with first shadow); balance
- A2 Allemande left with first shadow into waves with men in the middle; balance; walk forward into wave with partner in left hand; balance
- B1 Men pull by with right to swing neighbor
- B2 Women chain diagonally to the right (to second shadow); swing partner (all fall into your partner's arms)

Also, I've made up dances on the spot, because I want a dance to include some "next step" figure (taking dancers to the next level or next move). Most of these are glossary dances (a dance containing simple or common figures), with the redeeming quality of having fun while teaching a new move, but not so notable to name and pass on.

And I modify dances as needed. If there are many beginners, I might change the mildly ambiguous (where does it start, where does it end?) "star left" into the well-connected "long lines forward and back." Sometimes I change enough of these things to where it becomes a new dance. Here's an example, a major variation of the late Gene Hubert's "A Nice Combination."

- A1 Neighbor balance and swing
- A2 Circle left three-quarters; partner swing
- B1 Hey (women start, right shoulder)
- B2 Women chain, star left

I changed the A2 and B1.

Original: A1 Neighbor balance and swing/A2 Four in line down hall, turn as couple, return, bend into circle/B1 Clockwise three-quarters, partner swing/B2 Women chain, star left

EVO Are there any hits?

ERIK A couple of my dances have gone around. "There is No Way to Peace, Peace Is the Way" and "Missing Duck" have both traveled. And I think one caller actually called "The Rap Square."

EVO Do you have any thoughts about the country dance scene today that inspire you or disturb you?

ERIK Although I love contras, I've lamented the loss of interest in other forms of dance, like squares, circles, triple minors, and more. When I started, it was all like icing on the cake. As I've gone around calling, people now groan at dancing a circle mixer, or even shouts of disgust for a square dance. Also, I learned that a balance was a chance to show off. I love playing around with balances and fancy feet. I'm sorry that, for many, the balance has deteriorated to step-stomp-step-stomp, often followed with clap-clap.



NOTE: Of the many Erik Hoffman dances I have enjoyed calling, here is a nice one I recently discovered, dancing to Erik's calling in Berkeley. $\sim E.B.$

Malcom's X, by Erik Hoffman Contra, improper

- A1 Right hand balance neighbor and box the gnat; pull by neighbor to meet next neighbor for all to face old neighbor
- A2 Star right three-quarter; gents turn around to swing partner
- B1 Clockwise three-quarter; swing neighbor
- B2 Long lines forward and back; half hey (women start, right shoulder)

Evo Bluestein teaches dance in public schools and calls monthly community dances in Fresno, California; his articles, "Dance in the Classroom—Another Piece of the Logic Puzzle," appeared in the CDSS News, Fall 2009, and "Dare to Teach Kids Dance—Thirty-three Weeks in California Schools This Year!" was in the May/June 2008 issue (video about his school residency).