Contra Dance Callers and Musicians—Making Connections

by Chrissy Fowler

On November 3rd and 4th, 2006, an intrepid baker's dozen gathered under a disco ball in Belfast, Maine. We were on a quest to understand more about the mysterious dynamic of the caller-musician relationship. Uncharted territory! Musicians and callers with time on their hands to explore what happens on stage during those three short hours of a dance! Someone suggested, "The Caller-Musician connection is a myth." If so, what was this holy grail we sought? What could we learn?

Flashback to June 2006, Amherst, Massachusetts:

I was euphoric after a CDSS Callers Workshop (see "Do Try This at Home, CDSS News, issue 192, September/October 2006) and sat in my car talking to Linda Henry about importing the experience to my home community. We decided to hold a workshop in conjunction with the first Friday dance I co-organize and we agreed to lead it together, with Linda's LocoMojo bandmates Amy Larkin and Shirley White.

Fast forward again to November 3rd:

The monthly Belfast Flying Shoes Series begins with a community dance, which I call with an open band. The nine workshoppers played, danced and/or observed. During the "tasty treat potluck" before the contra dance, they got an assignment: note three to five things about the relationship between the band (LocoMojo) and the caller (me). In addition, everyone danced with our cheerful local crowd.

In the morning, we reconvened in a sunny Belfast home. We began by dancing David Kaynor's The Baby Rose to a medley of non-contra music. The ensuing hilarity set a tone of camaraderie. Next, we reviewed Friday's observations and noticed that they fell into three categories: matching tunes and dances, nuts and bolts (systems, signals, etc.), and interpersonal relationstps. Some (t)6(nc)28(o)13(r)24(po)21(r)24(a)16(t)36(e)13(d)12(q)16(ue)18(s)30(t)36(i)42(o)13(ns)33, sh as exchange to work that out?"

A session called "Any Jig or Reel Will Do—Just How True?" had more dancing: first, to a variety of recorded dance tunes that all can work with Tony Parkes' Shadrack's Delight, and second, to LocoMojo's live music that purposely didn't necessarily fit Tanya Rotenberg's Delphiniums and Daisies. Everyone expressed strong opinions, usually united in our delight (or disgust) with particular pairings, but sometimes diverging widely in our reactions. ("Say what?!?") All acknowledged our experience as dancers informs the ways we call or play.

To build common language, we brainstormed genres (e.g., French Canadian, old time, New England) and adjectives (over thirty!, e.g., sweet, clearly-phrased, flowing, dramatic). Later, the musicians among us played tunes to match those descriptors (e.g., Catharsis and Vladimir's Steamboat for driving, Dancing Bear for trance, Music for a Found Harmonium to make your head explode).

In his own musings about the workshop, Tavi Merrill noted, "Tunes fit a particular dance as they do because of their anatomy: the way musical figures are constructed and joined." Linda's anatomy lesson was a personal "aha!" moment for me. (She brought enlarged sheet music, had us imagine figures as LocoMojo played a tune, and then showed us what that tune looked like.) I was amazed to see on paper what I could feel in my body. I also

Top: Sharing observations from Friday night's dance; bottom: Hands twelve for a mixer. Photos by Bennett Konesni; used with permission.

realized how much I can learn from Ted Sannella's books, with his dances paired with tunes.

For our final session, we divided into two groups—callers and musicians—and gave ourselves plenty of time to do what usually happens in a few minutes at a dance. The callers collectively chose dances and requested particular sorts of tunes, and the musicians came up with sets. The process was reversed and the callers chose a dance to go with a given set of tunes. Finally, we said goodbye with a waltz mixer.

After the workshop, I considered the pros and cons of the process. (Quotes are participants' feedback.)

- Pre-workshop preparation yielded growth and learning for leaders.
- Intimate size increased input and facilitated group bonding.
- Potluck snacks and lunch reduced overhead.
- Scholarship funding from CDSS supported participation.
- Scholarship jobs supported the workshop leaders.
- The "house workshop" setting was cozy and saved money.
- CDSS consignment at the dance and workshop helped spread the word about CDSS.
- Relationships were built. ("Since then, I've played twice to Cynthia's calling, and the
 opportunities for creative exchange have been very satisfying.")
- Discussions and activities were animated and satisfying. ("Workshop sessions were wellorganized and informative.")
- An evening and a day were "the perfect amount of time."
- Seeds were planted for later germination. ("I recognized what tunes might fit and what might not. Prior to the workshop, I wouldn't have given it a thought.")
- · Some topics lingered. ("I want to talk more about who is in charge of the evening!")
- Small group size made finances tight.
- Promoting my own workshop wasn't easy.
- Implementing the specific details of the new pilot project was time-consuming and occasionally daunting.
- Financial and logistical support from CDSS was invaluable.

Even with the difficulties, the overall experience of bringing my peers together in thoughtful consideration of our work as callers and musicians was extraordinarily positive. I highly recommend a hometown workshop to anyone.*

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For more information—

- The Belfast Flying Shoes Dance Series: www.belfastflyingshoes.org or 207-338-0979
- CDSS Leadership Initiatives Fund, contact Linda Henry: 413-268-7426 or linda@cdss.org
- The Callers and Musicians' workshop, including a schedule of the day: www.cdss.org/workshop

* If you're considering sponsoring a workshop, see our website for a how-to manual to help you design and run your own event, plus information about logistical and financial support.

"Making Connections" appeared in the CDSS News, issue #195, March/April 2007.

Top: Anatomy lesson; bottom: Final waltz. Photos by Marian Fowler (top) and Bennett Konesni; used with permission.