



Cascade Promenade—A Northwest Dance Phenomenon

by Gordy Euler

The Cascade Promenade is one of the Northwest's premiere dance events. It is held every year in March and in 2014 will include dances in multiple cities over five days. As with most dance events, the Promenade started with a small idea, and it shows what homegrown cooperation and volunteerism can accomplish.

It all began in July 2009 with a lunchtime conversation at the annual Festival of American Fiddle Tunes in Port Townsend, Washington. At the table were several dance callers, musicians and organizers from up and down Interstate 5 in Oregon and Washington. The original idea was to organize a dance event patterned after the Roadhouse, which is the dance venue at the Northwest Folklife Festival in Seattle. Dancing at the Roadhouse runs from late morning until the evening, and the bands and callers change every hour. It was not a stretch to come up with name of the "Portland Roadhouse" as a nod to its Seattle namesake.

A smaller group of the original lunchtime conversationalists formed as the Portland Roadhouse Committee, and off we went. Committee members are from as far north as Bellingham, Washington and as far south as Roseburg, Oregon along I-5 (over four hundred miles). As such, committee meetings are almost entirely by teleconference, which has worked well.

There was lots of discussion about how to organize the day. It was decided that there would be eight bands and eight callers. Each band would get sixty-five minutes on stage, with a ten minute changeover time. This remains the formula for the day's events.

The Portland Megaband dance happens on a Saturday night, so it was decided that the Portland Roadhouse would be held the next day. A fair number of folks come from out-of-town for the Megaband dance

and having the Portland Roadhouse on Sunday would give them an additional dance experience. Of course, local dancers liked the idea as well, as it gives everyone an opportunity to extend the energy and excitement associated with the Megaband dance the night before.

The Roadhouse Committee worked through the tasks of finding a suitable hall; booking bands and callers; booking sound; recruiting volunteers for a variety of things like set-up, clean-up, manning the door, and finding house and stage managers. The initial voyage of the Portland Roadhouse was on March 14, 2010. The Portland Roadhouse is now a CDSS Group Affiliate with nonprofit/tax exempt status through CDSS.

So, what has this to do with the Cascade Promenade? Well, conversations among Roadhouse Committee participants continued. It was quickly noted that there are dances in Seattle on Thursdays and Fridays, dances in Vancouver on second Fridays, an English country dance in Portland on Fridays, and dances in Olympia and Eugene on second Saturdays. The conversation turned to the idea of linking all of these dances with a common theme. Dance organizers in these cities were contacted by the committee and all agreed that this was a great idea. As it turned out, the second Saturday Olympia dance had already been moved to Friday night to be between the Thursday night Seattle contradance and the Saturday night Portland Megaband dance.

The next thing that was needed was a name for the event, which was now a dance series. Several names were considered by all the dance organizers. My personal favorite was the "Upper Left Coast I-5 Large Carbon Footprint Event," and although accurate, it lacked that certain *je ne sais quoi*. The name that stuck for the event was the Cascade Promenade.

The Cascade Promenade is anchored by three major events:

- The THURSDAY LAKE CITY DANCE in Seattle is a dance marathon at the community center where dancing starts at 8 pm and ends at 11 pm with no walkthroughs or breaks in the music. Dancing morphs between contras, waltzes and squares. Callers and bands work together so that transitions between them are seamless. In 2013 there were seventeen bands and six callers involved. In 2014, the dance will be on March 6 and will be a benefit for the Northwest Folklife Festival.

- The PORTLAND MEGABAND DANCE takes place in the Smith Memorial Center ballroom at Portland State University. The Portland Megaband is a contradance band with seventy-five musicians, and the dance usually has an attendance of five

hundred or more. The dance is also a benefit—for the Portland Country Dance Community scholarship fund. In 2014, the dance will be on March 8.

- The PORTLAND ROADHOUSE DANCE happens at a community center in Milwaukie, a suburb of Portland. The dance runs from 11 am to 9 pm, and, as mentioned earlier, each band/caller get sixty-five minutes on stage. This event as well is a benefit, and the recipient the last two years has been the Northwest Folklife Festival. The idea of the Roadhouse is to showcase bands and callers from all over the Pacific Northwest. There is no application process; the eight callers and eight bands are invited to participate. Musicians and callers don't get paid other than with a travel stipend if they are from out-of-town. In 2014, the Roadhouse will be held on March 9.

In addition to Seattle and Portland, Cascade Promenade dances take place in Bellingham, Olympia, Vancouver and Eugene. Olympia has even added two dance events on the Saturday morning/afternoon of the Megaband dance.

One of the other ideas that came from the Roadhouse Committee is that of an "Iron Dancer" award. Dancers get a passport-type document stamped at the dances they attend, and at least four of the Cascade Promenade events have to be attended to qualify. The award links all of the participating dance communities. This year there were drawings for prizes for those that got the award, and there were twenty-seven Iron Dancers.

The Cascade Promenade has been successful (not to mention a ton of fun!) because of the uniqueness of the events and because of the work of a dedicated group of committee members and organizers. Each dance continues to be run by its own group of organizers under the banner of the Cascade Promenade. The committee believes it is important to support dance communities and continues to emphasize the 'benefit' aspect of the three major events toward that end.

For additional information, check out cascadepromenade.org and portlandroadhouse.org.

Photo on previous page by Doug Plummer.
WEB EXTRA: For more photos, see our website, <http://www.cdss.org/cdss-news.html>.