A Musical Journey -- An Interview with Nils Fredland
Part II: Dance and Song

Interviewed by Pat MacPherson

I asked Nils about the current connection in his life between singing and dancing and how that had happened.

As often as I can, I like to lead these one-shot singing workshops at dance weekends. And there was a period when I first moved to Keene when I was the music teacher/chorus/band leader at the Waldorf School here and that also exposed me to a whole body of material that I didn't have access to. Seth Houston was the previous music teacher and he had a bunch of material that was great for the eleven to fourteen year olds I was working with. I brought a lot of the stuff that I knew both from Monkey Puzzle and from Northern Harmony to my work. And Seth was very generous with his library. There's a fair amount of the material that I gathered from him that I now use in my singing workshops. It is really perfect for an hour-and-a-half long workshop for people that are at a contra dance weekend and that just want something different in their day.

Can you talk about the relationship between singing and dancing, and dance calling?

It really goes back to that period of time where I was preparing for the Ooolites recording and then the Endless Light session that followed it. My first exposure to shape note music in particular probably happened on the same day that I went to my first contra dance in Plainfield, VT. Shape note music and contra dancing are really tied together for me because my exposure to those two totally new things happened almost at exactly the same moment. That's just how it is in my heart.

There was a period in there where I was in Bloomington, after my time with Johnny Socko and not singing with Monkey Puzzle, and not really doing a lot of the kind of music that I had been exposed to with the Ooolites and during the Endless Light session, when I was doing a lot of contra dancing.

I started dancing regularly in 1998 and somewhere in there was probably the first time that I ever tried calling a dance. It was Sam Bartlett's wife, Abby Ladin, who told me that I would be a good caller.

Well, what did you think?

I think I might have expressed an interest in it, but it wasn't what I felt really compelled to do at the time. I had a friend named Mark Langner, a caller who lives in Asheville, who showed me the mechanics of calling and showed me my first dance card and he said, "OK, this is how it works and here's how it relates to the tune and you're a musician, so you'll understand it. The calling part's gonna be easy for you but the thing you're really gonna have to focus on is how to teach." I remember getting up during an open mic in Bloomington and realizing just how true that was. It was a good group of dancers and they knew what I was trying to say, but I had no idea. Basically I was lucky on that night because all I really had to do was say: make wavy lines and they all did it. Ladies chain and they all did! I didn't have to really teach anything. I remember not knowing how to tell the band that I didn't want them to play anymore; y'know, the dance had been going on for long enough. It was a good experience. I did two open mic nights I guess and then I didn't do it for a couple of years.

After Bloomington I went on the road with Northern Harmony in early 2000. I came back from that and was just at home in Maryland. I moved to Arizona and happened to show up in Phoenix at the local contra dance there and by the end of that night, I was the local caller and a member of the Board. They saw this young, energetic, good dancer and they just went (noise), which was great. They didn't have a local caller at the time. I told them that I had a little bit of experience and I sort of lied; you know, I'd called two dances, but I think they thought that meant I'd called two whole nights. And they said, great, you wanna call next month and I said, sure! So, I did call over the course of about two years, through the rest of 2000 and into 2001.

I was working as a special education teacher. But the thing that really kept me being in Phoenix was my role in the dance community, which became increasingly large. I became the local caller and I started bouncing around doing other dances in Arizona and just gained a lot of confidence. I had a lot of support from people. I think I basically took a dance community that was kind of waning in terms of energy and interest and gave it a jolt and it still is really healthy. There's a caller that came after I left,

Peg Hesley, who really picked up the ball. I'm not suggesting that the Phoenix dance community was going to die if it hadn't been for me, but the same folks that started twenty years before I moved to town, were still the people that were on the Board. The same story can be told for so many different dance communities in the country, and this was just one. I showed up at just the right time both for them and for me, because it gave me a chance to just try this thing that I had been kind of peripherally interested in since the time that I did it in Bloomington. And all of a sudden I had this situation where I could do as much of it as I wanted to do and people were so grateful and super patient and really helpful. And that's where I learned to call dances—just by being there and being given tons of opportunity every time I turned around. It was kind of towards the end of that time when I realized that I really didn't want to be in Phoenix. I was starting to do more traveling out of town to call dances around there and distances to call are just hours; I remember driving twelve hours to Salt Lake City to call a contra dance for forty people. So, it was then that I made a phone call and said, I'm coming home and I'm gonna be a contra dance caller.

Can you describe what took place to make you know that's what you wanted to do?

I'm totally at home doing this work. And I can recall experiences calling in Phoenix when it felt that way. I remember the first night that I called there just knowing that I was screwing up and struggling a little bit but just the whole time thinking, YES!!! Oh man! This is great! I love it! This is more fun than anything I've ever done. And I've done a lot of fun stuff. This is it! This is the thing! And that just increased over the time that I was there. I knew that I was better than a lot of people that were doing it. The fact that I enjoyed it and I could give people something they weren't getting from other people that were taking the microphone meant a lot and made me want to do it more.

When I got back East I didn't have any concept of what it was gonna be like. I remember coming back to Maryland and thinking alright, geographically things are much closer together and I know that there's a lot of dancing that happens in Maryland and in New England and I'll just come and I'll just start calling dances there. It was easy in Arizona; I'm sure it's going to be easy here. And actually it was not nearly as hard as it should have been. I was kind of blissfully unaware of how difficult it actually should be to get booked at Glen Echo. But I found an open mic in Annapolis which was a mile from my parents' house and I went there. I got in touch with the organizer and said, "Can I call this open mic and here's who I am and I've just moved back." And she said, sure! Steve Hickman was the fiddler and Jonathan Jensen might have been playing piano. Anyway, I called three slots at this open mic and the organizer for the Glen Echo Sunday night dance was there and she came up afterwards and said, "You're great! You wanna call at Glen Echo on a Sunday?" I said, "Sure! What's Glen Echo?"

And then Beth Molaro booked me down in Asheville shortly after I moved back. So, I was doing all of this driving to these various places and the calendar obviously was thin when I first moved back. Not even close to being able to call it what I did as my profession. But I was living at home so I had no expenses really. Thanks to my parents for being as generous as they are. I didn't have another job so I would just say yes to everything and saying yes kind of got to be a habit. That's what I did for three years—just drive all over the country and call as many single night local dances as I could and it was through that that I started getting festivals.

The period of time when I was doing that was what made it possible for me to make a living doing it now. I was not making a living doing it then. I was living mostly on the generosity of the people who loved me. It was not like I was bringing in enough money to feed myself or to make a car payment. The car that I travelled around in before I bought the car that I have now was a car that was given to me. It was basically a new car at the time, and this friend of mine basically said, "Take this car and pay me if you can. Just take it."

When I weave the whole tale, it's like I hope that I'm giving back in the way that is consistent with everything that's been given to me over the course of the time that I've been moving my way through life. Because I don't even really feel like I've had to make choices. I don't feel like I've really had to think about what to do next because it's just been so obvious.

The strength that I carry in both of these roles [song leading and calling] comes from the people that I learned a lot from. Go back to Mr. Cooper—because I was young and I wasn't aware in an adult way about his relationship to the music, he seemed to be all just passion for the music and clear in his delivery and in his expectations and that's a big part of who I am as a leader. I am a lot of heart and I'm clear in my musical vision. Here's this song; I love this song; you're gonna love this song; let's sing it together. It's the same in the way that I approach sharing dances with people—be as clear as possible in the teaching and as obvious as possible in communicating my passion for the material.

I'm more of a scholar with dancing than I am with singing. And I have worked with other choral leaders who have that scholarly side who are [also] very, very good at leading a group. I've watched these people—Kate Howard is one and Brendan Taaffe is another one—who are great song leaders who have intelligence about the music and where the music comes from. I did a weeklong workshop a couple of years ago with Brendan and Kate and it was during that week in Ireland that I realized that this was something they had in their presentation and delivery that I didn't have. I think that did, at the time, hold me back a little bit. I'm still aware of it but I'm not letting it define my ability to be an effective song leader. That's what the Pinewoods week showed me—during American Week [one of CDSS's music and dance weeks, summer 2009] there was something really magical about the energy in that group of singers. It was something that started with my ability to lead a group in song; that was the seed and it just grew into this whole other thing that was amazing. I had a part in cultivating it but it was something that we really all did together.

That experience is making me be even more insistent that I be given the opportunity to lead a singing workshop at dance weekends that I go to. Which is generally not a very hard sell, but some people want more dancing and less of the other kind of thing. I think I'm going to get to be a pain in the butt of a lot of these dance weekend organizers; it's good that I have the reputation that I do because I'm doing things like saying I want to lead a singing workshop and insisting that they let me call [singing] squares and a lot of people just don't want to do that.

You've talked with me previously about what calling singing squares means to you. Tell me a bit more about that.

In that period of time that I was living back East and doing a lot of touring around, a friend handed me a pre-release copy of Ralph's CD "Shindig in the Barn" with Ralph Sweet's All-Stars. This was a pre-mastered, raw version that she'd gotten from one of the friends of the Greenfield [Massachusetts] Grange. It's the story that I tell in the introduction to the book (*On the Beat with Ralph Sweet*). I heard Ralph's voice and it was like—OK, there's the next project. And I don't know this man but I'm ready to learn everything I can glean from listening to this record eight thousand times and let's see where that takes me. That is what opened up starting to call the singing squares.

Meeting Ralph made it something more profound because he was the source of all of the dances that I knew at the time. I've learned things from other sources now but it all comes back to him. When I first started calling the dances I didn't know where the tunes came from; I had no idea how long these dances had been around; I just knew that I liked "The Auctioneer" and it seemed like a good dance and I could figure out the chords and teach a band. Early on, I just liked the variety, but then dancers seemed to enjoy it and I felt like it was something I could do well. I understood that I could communicate the dance in a way that was pleasant for people; and people that hate squares had fun dancing the singing squares.

Calling singing squares lets you combine singing and dancing—both so important to you.

I think it involves more than that. One thing is that the singing squares do what other elements of calling dances aren't really designed to do. That is, the caller's the host and a caller with a good personality and a good way of being commands attention from the floor and that's a good thing, but it's not really the caller's job to be the center of attention and the life of the party. When I'm calling contra dances I'm just trying to teach effectively. If I know the crowd that I'm working with really well, then there can be some kind of playful elements involved. But if I don't, then I'm teaching as quickly as I can and making sure that everyone is well taken care of on the floor and letting the music go and getting out of the way as fast as possible. And if people are paying attention and they look up on stage, they see me bouncing around and I think that's one of the things that make the dances I call feel good. People can look up there and go—Man, he's having a good time. But the singing squares allow me to put on that performer hat. You're doing all of those things that a caller does and then you're taking on this whole other performer persona that doesn't exist quite to the same extent when I'm just wearing the contra caller hat. It kind of brings back the Monkey Puzzle, Johnny Socko side—it allows me to step into the spotlight a little bit. I like it.

And it's not the fake Johnny Socko person?

It's a totally genuine thing. Through work with the book and meeting and talking with Ralph early on, I understand a lot more about where the singing squares came from. I also feel that in addition to the fact that they're good dances and they add variety to a program, there's an important historical side to it. My ability to do these dances well is going to mean that they are going to continue being danced and embraced by contra dancers into the future. And that is important and that is—I

want to use the word "humbling." I don't know if that's the right word but I do feel a responsibility and it's a kind of profound responsibility to these dances. It's not really about me; it's about the material. And I think that gets to be truer the more I understand about the singing squares themselves and the more I get to know Ralph and the more I work on the book.

Does being a singer affect how you hear dance music and/or does being a dance caller affect how you lead songs?

I would say being a dance caller affects how I lead songs more than being a singer affects how I hear dance music. Though, being a singer definitely affects how I call dances. They definitely tie in and it goes both ways for sure. As a dance caller, particularly as a contra dance caller, I think there are a lot of different ways to deliver the calls. The most natural way for me is not necessarily to sing the calls; I'm not trying to clash so much that it's unpleasant; I'm basically speaking the calls in rhythm. I'm, for lack of a better word, rapping out the calls in a way. But the way that I deliver the calls is definitely related really closely to the music. I'm not talking over the music so much as I'm trying to be part of it and have my voice be a unique enough element that it does what it's supposed to do for the dancers. So, yes, my singing definitely informs my dance calling in that way. And when you move into the realm of calling squares, the relationship is much more obvious. In the patter squares, I am really trying to find a spot in the harmony of the tune that I can kind of chant along with and then the singing squares is where all those things come together in a really obvious way.

In terms of the way my dance calling affects my song leading—finding out what works as a dance caller when you're trying to communicate a figure to a crowd of people of varying experience and standing in front of people of varying experience that are wanting to learn a song—I think the same teaching techniques exist and work. I don't feel like those two things are different at all. I'm basically putting on the same teaching hat.

This goes back to the experience of being led by Mr. Cooper, back when I was eight. He was gently insistent that it needed to be a particular way and I think that I'm also that insistent as a dance caller. As a dance caller you need to be a little more subtle with that insistence; or you need to find more subtle ways to communicate the beauty of a dance. Still maintaining that fun, loose feel but knowing what it feels like—what a particular contra dance feels like when it's really danced perfectly and trying to communicate that through the back door. In song leading, because we're more sitting down together and saying, alright, here's this song and here's what we're going to do to make it great, that communication can be a little bit more direct.

The things are all related, for sure.

The interview was held on September 23, 2009 at Nils' home in Keene, New Hampshire. Part 1 appeared in the CDSS News, Spring 2010. Both parts will become part of the CDSS News Archives.

Nils in action

1. Leading CDSS American Week 2009 participants in a South African apartheid-era song "Garai Pano" to close out the evening dance -- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxqmk9H3v_E

2. Nils and his workshop singers in the finale of the FolkMADness talent show, May 2009 -- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJx_boQq2iI

3. Leading a round, Ooh La La dance weekend in Richmond, Quebec, July 2009 -- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9_9xcS0_dc&NR=1

4. Playing with the band, Ooh La La dance weekend, Richmond, Quebec, July 2009 -- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIOy1JuW3U0&feature=related

5. Calling a square, Lava Meltdown, Lava Hot Springs, ID, March 2010 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jx9gCLJI_c