



Ooh La La!

News from Canada—Ooh La La, A Contra Dance Weekend Built on Cultural Exchange and Local Abundance

by Jaige Trudel and Adam Broome

“Voulez-vous dancer?”
“Yes, thank you.”

Bienvenue à Ooh La La, in Richmond, Québec, is a dance weekend where dancers from all over Québec, Ontario, and the United States have been sharing in a cross-cultural opportunity every year since July 2007.

Originally dreamed up and organized by caller Jackie Hall and the members of the band Crowfoot, Ooh La La has maintained some defining features from its onset: to cross-pollinate Québécois traditional dance with American contra, to promote a context in which to share a common love of community in social dance and song, and to provide healthy, local cuisine throughout the event. It had been Jackie’s vision to start a dance weekend in the eastern townships of Québec, to offer the local dance community a chance for some serious immersion, and to bring a strong core of dancers from New England up to the eastern townships of Québec to enjoy the charm and character of the area. She knew of the perfect venue, and asked if our group, Crowfoot, would be interested in helping to organize the event and be the featured performers. It seemed like a great match: Jackie had all the local contacts and we had done enough travelling as a band to have recognized favourite features and practical ideas that we thought worth striving for at a weekend event.

The first year Ooh La La was launched, it was held at a quaint little grange hall in Ways Mills, Québec. Situated next to a stream, the two-storey building had wooden floors throughout with a kitchen and dining space downstairs and a beautiful dance hall upstairs, ample grassy areas around the premises, and two historical wooden churches within view across the bridge. You could see a house or two set in the meadows and that was about it. Delightfully rural, with accommodation options within a fifteen or twenty minutes drive, the isolated and limited space made for an intimate event of less than ninety people. Even so, it was necessary on Saturday night when we opened the dance to the public to make a contra line downstairs and run auxiliary speakers to the remote dance set! Meals were served buffet style, and except for an isolated shower on Saturday afternoon, the weather blessed us with favourable conditions and most folks chose to eat outside with friends on the lawn. Dancers from away were enchanted with the setting; dancers from nearby were taken with contra dancing! The event broke even and we set out to host another.

Old buildings sometimes present challenges however, and this location was no exception. The dance floor upstairs underwent some structural changes during the winter and was desperately in need of repair the following year. We only realized

this after it became too late to change location, and in a last ditch effort to save the dance experience we rented a roll-out dance floor to cover up the gaps that had developed in the floor. Although better than nothing at all, this was a far cry from a floor worthy of dancing for a whole weekend. This, coupled with the grange committee intending to significantly raise the rent on us, prompted a search for a new location. We were pointed by a mutual friend toward Richmond, home of dance caller Donald Dubuc, and found the hall that is still our location today. Not quite the adorable little grange by the stream in Ways Mills, the dance hall in Richmond does provide a beautiful sprung wood floor in a hall without posts that accommodates about a hundred and fifty dancers. There are kitchens, and round tables enough for everyone to dine together, and again plenty of lawn and shady trees for folks to enjoy. The village itself hosts some beautiful architecture and is historically interesting for those who are drawn to explore it.

The Ooh La La organizing committee has also changed many times throughout the evolution of the event. Past committee members include Roger Williams, Emily Addison, Brent Hyde and Donald Dubuc, in addition to Jackie Hall and Nicholas Williams who helped start the event. The current committee consists of the authors (Jaige Trudel and Adam Broome) and Mary Wesley.

Every year Crowfoot has been the house band, sharing the stage with guest performers from the USA and Canada. Although the schedule focuses mainly on contra dance there is always a Québécois component and over the years we have engaged some of Québec’s finest traditional musicians, callers and dance instructors to present *les sets carrés*, as well as music and gigue workshops.

The quality of the food at a weekend contributes significantly to the overall tone, and wholesome meals prepared with care and elegantly presented have the ability to put the whole experience over the top. Featuring local cuisine along with local talent serves to promote the general vision of Ooh La La; it is another way to recognize and partake in what the community has to offer. The meals generally feature freshly baked bread, organic vegetables and strawberries from nearby farms, local eggs, homemade yoghurt, artisan cheeses and locally raised meats.

It is interesting to see how the community of Richmond has reached out and embraced the yearly event. One such example is illustrated by our slowly expanding team of staff hosts. In the first few years in Richmond, it was a trick to find enough options in the community to provide beds for our featured performers. Then something magical happened—the folks who had been hosting our guest musicians found the experience to be really enjoyable, and they

adored meeting these people from afar who travelled all the way to Richmond for a weekend of community social dance. They told their neighbours, and soon we were hearing that others on the same street wanted to host a performer too. Some of our local hosts come to the afternoon concerts, some just like to hear the singing circle on the lawn, and although many have yet to join in the dancing they look forward to our event every year.

Part of the overall vision for Ooh La La has been to recognize the importance of keeping traditions active and accessible, ensuring a future that will continue to enrich the lives of those who are drawn to participate in community dance and song. One step in achieving this goal has been to make the event appealing and accessible to young people on all levels. Initially working to increase the opportunities available to youth on a budget, the committee has found creative ways to make the weekend affordable to them. Ooh La La has always relied on volunteer participation and by dedicating a certain number of volunteer positions to youth over the past few years, we have succeeded in attracting a large following of young dancers. In return, Ooh La La has benefitted from a devoted team, many of them in their late teens and twenties, who joyfully wash dishes, prepare ingredients for meals, sweep floors and do other chores during the weekend. On a couple of occasions, we have been graced with young volunteers who are talented musicians, who have contributed their musical skills by playing for workshops as part of their volunteer hours.

There are still more ideas to explore and the committee is active in finding new incentives and programmes for youth outreach. In our travels as performers we began to notice young callers and musicians who were making the rounds and committing a lot of energy to developing their skills. In 2011, we decided to try an experiment by creating a profile that would feature an up and coming caller under thirty, giving our selected invitée an opportunity to take on the responsibilities required to be a dance weekend performer. The demands would include working with both feature bands during the day, fulfilling a half hour feature during the Saturday evening dance, as well as leading a workshop of their choosing. The proposed model was a success, and we felt that we achieved our goals: giving our chosen caller exposure to a wider audience, an opportunity to network with musicians, callers and other event organizers and also a taste of what it is to programme for and lead at a dance weekend.

The model continues to grow and each year

we scout for potential candidates. Mary Wesley was our first new-generation caller; now, three years later she is a favourite throughout the contra circuit and we are happy to be featuring her on the program this year as one of our contra callers. This year Ooh La La is expanding the “featured youth” concept to include two talented young musicians who caught our attention at the Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend. Fiddler Audrey Budington and pianist Clayton Clemetson are two rising stars in the New England folk scene. Our up and coming caller this year will be Bradley Smith, joining us all the way from Kentucky.

We are in our eighth year now and our initial idea has grown in many rewarding ways. In addition to a weekend packed with contras, our programme offers a pre-dinner concert and a waltz session that combines with an afternoon high tea (we encourage attendees to bring homemade teatime treats to share). The schedule also includes workshops on the finer points of contra dance technique, waltz, gigue, and there is always a musician’s workshop, a caller’s workshop and a song circle. We have three chefs, providing breakfast, lunch and dinner. We eat all our meals in the dance hall and afterwards roll away the tables and set up for the dancing as in days of old. Our Saturday night dance is always open to the general public and through this our community continues to expand. Many who make the journey north decide to include the weekend as part of a larger trip to the Maritimes, Montréal, Québec City or other parts of eastern Canada.

Crossing into Québec is a cultural experience for our friends from the US. You need a passport and you will hear French spoken wherever you go. Although you can get by just fine in English, and the event is presented in English, French conversation and culture permeate throughout the weekend as many of our longtime attendees are from the province. Of course, the language of music and dance need no translation. Neither does a smile, or the sharing of food around a table.

***“Would you like to join us?”
“Bien oui, merci!”***

Devoted to sustaining community social dance, the authors have been working together as dance event organizers for the past twelve years. As fulltime musicians, they perform throughout the US and Canada with their bands Maivish and Crowfoot; they live in Québec. For more about this year’s event, July 4-6, 2014, visit <http://oohlaladance.com/>.

“News from Canada” features news about Canadian events and groups. Ideas for articles should be sent to Rosemary Lach, rosemarylach@yahoo.ca or to Bev Bernbaum, wturnip@sympatico.ca.