

On Open Stages

by Luke Donforth

I love contra dancing. It's a big part of my life. I enjoy it as a dancer, as a caller, and as a musician. I've been lucky enough to share in dance communities around the country. And around the country, several communities have the occasional open mic for callers and open band for music. I heartily encourage both of these traditions separately, but do not think they should be paired together by default.

I got my first gigs at open mics. It was a great way to try a little bit, and significantly lowered the entry barrier. It also meant I could do one for part of the evening, and still dance part of the evening. There is a camaraderie for the performers and a sense of building community as a whole.

But here's my "however" on open stages. Open bands are usually not as solid as gigging bands that are hired for an evening. I want both to exist, and I dance to both. I go to an open band evening expecting that things won't be as tight. There's more likely to be sound problems, more time will be spent figuring out sets, the tune changes might not be as smooth or dramatic, etc.

Open mic calling is usually more disjointed than hiring one caller. Several callers may only have one or two simple dances to call, and they might be very similar to each other. Or you may get aspiring choreographers all trying out their new challenging dances. The teaching may be spotty. There may be more late calls or miscalls than from a touring caller. I'd wager there is less of a shape or cohesive structure to the overall choreography of the evening.

All of those things are fine. Dancing is building community. It's not all dance nirvana. But during a dance, it's an interaction between the band, the caller and the dancers (facilitated by the sound person and organizers, never forget them!). If the band isn't as polished as it could be, you hope the caller or the other dancers help elevate the evening. If the callers are a little rough, it'd be nice to have great music and dancers. Having open bands and open mic calling often knocks two pillars of the dance down a peg (and some experienced dancers might anticipate that and decide to spend that evening's energy elsewhere).

As a caller, working with an open band is often harder than a regular band. They might not have established or practiced communication protocols. Their tune book is probably constrained. Giving inexperienced callers, folks possibly calling their first dance, the added challenge of working with an open band does not simplify their task, facilitate their success, or give the best chance to grow the dance tradition.

As a musician, working with multiple callers in rapid succession is challenging. They describe what they want from the music differently, and have different signals for how long and when they prompt changes. Giving inexperienced dance musicians, folks possibly playing for their first dance, the added challenge of open mic calling does not simplify their task, build their confidence or give the best chance to grow the dance tradition.

Now, I would certainly rather there be an open band and open mic than no dance. Have the dance. That's key. There are also fabulous dance series out there with a long tradition of open band and open mics together, and they can rock your socks off. They're built around solid, experienced anchors that organize and mentor, but it's still not the easiest pairing.

There are other ways of nurturing the next generation of talent. With musicians, it's possible to sit in with an established band and play in the back or without a pickup. It's a little more difficult with calling, but established callers can guest a slot or two for a new caller. There are also caller development groups like the Mad Robin Callers Collective (Vermont) and Hatchlings (Missouri).^{*} Callers and bands can utilize house parties as low stakes venues with smaller audiences. All of these are excellent ways to continue a vibrant dance tradition and help new talent develop.

If you have a regular dance series (weekly or monthly) that usually hires in bands and callers, and you occasionally have open mics and open bands, I applaud you for building the dance community and continuing the tradition. But I ask you to consider having your open calling on a different night than your open band. Most open stages don't get paid. Possibly use a bit of the door to pay an experienced caller more to work with an open band, or maybe hire a hot band that will elevate an evening of developing calling. Keep building the community. Mix experienced folks with the new blood. Keep dancing.

** Web extra—Articles about the collectives, by Mary Wesley and Martha Edwards are available through the online version of this issue, <http://www.cdss.org/cdss-news.html>.*

Luke Donforth is a dancer and caller living in Vermont. His dance, Voyager, appeared in the Summer 2013 issue of the CDSS News, and his article about participating in this year's Catapult Contra Showcase, was in the last issue.