## The Squeal Index ~ Can Old Time Bands Make It On the Contra Dance Scene?

## by Joyce Cauthen, Susan Davis and Scott Russell

Back in the '70s, before old time musicians did much singing, they mainly sat around in circles and played tunes. At least that's what we did here in Alabama and Georgia. We weren't invited to do many stage performances, as normal audiences didn't want to hear one tune after another, especially since they all sounded alike. Even our spouses and children wouldn't stick around long to listen. But loving the music as we did, old time musicians wanted someone to share it with and before long, we realized that we were destined to play for country dances. Most of the fiddle tunes we played were dance tunes and there were folks out there who wanted to dance. It was perfect — so perfect that if we didn't have country dance groups where we lived, we organized them. We formed dance bands, gave ourselves goofy names, practiced, played for dances, received our applause, went home and practiced some more.

It was just like it ought to be. Baby boomers were dancing to the same music with the same spirit that their ancestors had, maybe. There was one difference. By this time, contra dancing had enjoyed a revival across the nation, becoming popular in places where it had never lived before. But it didn't matter; dancing contras to southern old time string music was tremendous fun. Contras were easy to call, quick to teach and that was great because we got to play more tunes in one evening.

Fast forward to the '90s. The emergence of some very creative New England contra dance bands showed musicians of persuasions other than old time that they too could be part of the dance scene. Before long old time musicians — who in general cared more about tunes than the dance — were sharing the dance schedule with bands that in general cared more about the dance than the tunes. The latter day contra bands developed a repertoire of musical devices which they, as well as their detractors, call "cheap tricks," designed to elicit cheers from the dancers. These include medleys combining tunes that are wildly different in key and character, long passages played by one instrument until the rest of the band comes in with a bang, chords sustained to create tension then released to spark pandemonium, abundant use of syncopation, dynamics and daring pauses. Their tunes can be traditional old time, Celtic, New England, Eastern European or of some other exotic origin, with snippets of American television theme songs and golden-oldie rock and roll tunes thrown in, played on an ever-changing array of instruments, perhaps fiddle, keyboard, bass, rainsticks, bongos or a full drum trap.

The dancers eat it up. They greet each new trick with cheers and throw themselves into the dance even more exuberantly than before. Though some find the music distracting and manipulative, many others find it great fun. They recognize the tricks and feel that they are in on the joke. They clamor for more. They begin to prefer these dramatic bands to those who simply strive to play good tunes well. As a result, today many of those booking dance bands employ a squeal index and a band that doesn't make 'em shout gets a low rating. In dance communities where old time musicians are not involved in the dance organization, they may find their bands booked less frequently at regular dances, never invited to dance weekends and feeling like second-class citizens in general.

Many old time musicians have simply given up on the contra dance scene; however they should take heart in knowing that there are still plenty of contra dancers out there who enjoy their music. The Birmingham Country Dance Society books only old time bands for its dance weekend and always reaches its capacity of three hundred within a week or two of sending out the fliers. That weekend has showcased a large number of straight ahead southern old time bands that have figured out how to play for contra dances without sacrificing the integrity of the music. These bands employ a few tricks, but not cheap ones.

In the following pages, we'll talk about some of the "tricks" — some essential, some optional — that old time bands might want to consider if they wish to hold their own in the contra dance world.

The essential "trick" is to master, absolutely and unequivocally, the basics of playing for a dance.

These are playing with distinct phrase and undeniable pulse, working effectively and co-existing happily with callers, being sensitive to the tempo needs of the dancers, playing AABB tunes, being flexible and good natured about tune choices, and being friendly, cooperative and happy to be there.

The basic elements of dance music — pulse and phrase — have to be present all night long to sustain good contra dancing. The pulse is provided by the rhythm instruments — a steady downbeat supplied by bass notes (guitar or bass) and a reliable, tasty upbeat to give lift (the strum of the guitar). Dancers' feet go down on the downbeat (that's the easy part), but what goes down has got to come up or it isn't dancing. Fortunately, old time music excels in the pulse category and a good old time band carries the crowd along with its music.

Strong phrasing is what gives shape to the dance (as well as the music) and makes contra dance choreography work. Among other things, this means that those groove tunes that we love to play with one or two chords and four or five melody notes may flop as contra dance tunes and probably should be saved for a square or a free-style clogging number later.

Tempo is important. Contra dances can be danced to a fairly wide range of tempos if the music has the necessary pulse and phrasing. Vary tempos from selection to selection, having some blazingly fast tunes and some that hold up well at a slower pace. Setting the tempo is the caller's responsibility, but it is perfectly permissible for the band leader to let the caller know that they have more than one speed and more than one mood and would relish the opportunity to fit their tunes to the needs of the dance. Start the dance with a strong four beat shuffle that indicates the tempo, then keep an eye on the dancers to see if the pace you've set is a good one. If you see them running to finish a figure, not making it to their places in time or if you see their tongues hanging out, you may want to slow down. If you see dragging feet and exaggerated movements, you'll know to heist it up a bit. When you've been given the signal to stop, you can signify the end of the tune by retarding, you can put a tag to it or you can do a hard, percussive out.

Medleys are just about mandatory these days (unless you are Ralph Blizard and can improvise all night). Changing tunes during the course of one long contra dance not only makes the music more interesting for the dancers but for the players as well. It's difficult to put together good medleys in the heat of the dance; most of us need to plan and practice them. In doing so, we should pair tunes that not only go together musically but also have an emotional effect on the dance. Use the first tune to "set up" the second tune so that the energy level rises. Good key changes made in the right direction can certainly uplift the dancers. Banjo players can drop out to retune, then come in at the beginning of the second tune. If they don't want to do that, they can use key-change medleys as justification for that second banjo they've been wanting.

In medleys, the duration of each tune does not always have to be fifty/fifty. Use simple techniques to highlight the change such as blocking the chords (striking the chord with one big downstroke at the beginning of the phrase, leaving a "space" before the next chord), taking a breath (a slight pause) between tunes, or occasionally starting the second tune with a brief melody solo. Make sure the tempo stays the same for both tunes and that both tunes have that strong pulse that drives the dancers down the hall and right back up again.

The band usually chooses when to change tunes, though you can ask the caller to cue you. Try to time the change by watching a couple, so that the new tune coincides with a new top couple entering the dance. It's possible that the caller will not want a medley for a square, however, and it's best to clarify that before the dance starts.

A tune list filled with a variety of tunes you play well — hoedowns, marches, reels, polkas, rags and more than two romantic waltzes — is essential. Among them should be a few driving tunes, some smooth, some sweet, some stately. You'll definitely want to have a few modal tunes on there. Take a good look at the chords of the tunes on your list. Chord structure reveals how tunes are different from each other and dancers relate it to as much as they do melody. You'll want to make sure you have enough interest and variety in this respect

Before selecting a tune or medley to play for a dance, ask the caller about the figures in that dance. Find out where the balances are, so you will know to choose tunes with good strong downbeats at those points. Inquire about the mood of the dance. Is it bouncy, marchy, sultry or hoedownish? Take that into consideration as well as the key and mood of the tune you played right before this one in order to avoid redundancies. Once you've chosen the tune, go only where it takes you and take the dancers with you. Improvisations should be spontaneous, used sparingly and should grow organically out of the tune and the tradition.

Ways to add zest include rhythm dropouts, which are effective when done well and when the melody instruments can carry the dance. Also a banjo or fiddle solo gets attention. A two fiddle band can add variety by playing harmonies sometimes and doubling other times. Guitarists can use different voicing of the chords (the "arthritic" A, for example). They can play runs, walks and leading tones to the next chord. Strums can be played percussively or deadened. The bass player can use runs, single notes, leading tones, slapping and bowing. Most of these tricks show up one time or another on the old 78s from the golden age of string band music. They are fun to do in moderation and they add interest to the music for the dancers.

Even when you've pulled all the tricks out of the bag, you may still not register on the squeal scale. One real problem for old time bands today is the "big box" venues that have become common in some communities as contra dances have come to attract large numbers of dancers, in some places, hundreds at one dance. Many dance groups, especially in cities, have outgrown the cozy, friendly dance halls they started in and have moved to hollow gyms and other large spaces. It's just plain hard to fill up some of these halls with sound from a handful of acoustic instruments. That's one of the reasons that dancers respond noticeably to electrified, wind or brass instruments and drums.

These large, urban dances also foster a competitive nature, both for the dancers and for bands that may be attracted by the relatively large take at the door. Traveling bands need these gigs to pay the bills. This competition can lead to an escalating array of musical tricks and gimmicks, which puts traditional bands at a disadvantage. If you want to play these venues, look at ways to make your sound bigger and richer, such as adding more instruments (second fiddle, harmonica, bass, mandolin are good choices). Work to get the most possible from sound reinforcement — use quality pick ups and microphones and come early to work with the sound technician for a thorough sound check. If you have good rapport with the dance group's leaders, encourage them to consider acoustic treatments of the hall, if possible, and sound system improvements, if needed. All the musicians and the dancers who play that hall would benefit.

Another alternative is to *not* play the big boxes but instead seek out dances at smaller, warmer halls where old time music feels right at home. Alternative smaller dances are beginning to sprout up in lots of towns, organized by dancers who prefer a more traditional dance with a community/participatory feel.

A third alternative is not to play for dances at all. That's a perfectly reasonable response to the climate in many country dance groups today. However, we, the authors, plan to hang in there. The magic of contra dancing is what happens when the music, the dance and the dancers come together in unity, just like what happens in a really good old time jam. To us, the joy that comes when we hit upon just the right tune and the dancers are loving the music — and loving us for making it — is worth the effort that it takes to make it on the contra scene.

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"The Squeal Index" was first published in The Old-Time Herald, Fall 2001 and was reprinted with permission in the CDSS News, issue #165, March/April 2002.