## Baltimore's Burn-Off-the-Calories Thanksgiving Dance

by Mike Franch



What do dancers and musicians do on Thanksgiving night? In the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area, many come to the Baltimore Folk Music Society's Burn-Off-the-Calories Thanksgiving dance. BFMS has held this multi-

hyphen (open-band, open-mic, family- and-newcomer friendly) evening for eight years. It gives families and groups of friends something to do after eating and provides a social evening for people who might otherwise have spent the evening by themselves.

Other communities could replicate this dance. It pays its minimal costs, is fun, and builds community. It just needs a coordinator and a few volunteers (generally easy to recruit on the spot)

for set-up and cleanup. The dancers contribute leftover desserts for refreshments. It only happens once a year, only lasts a few hours, and only requires booking one musician. Key elements are:

1. A coordinator. This is not a complicated event but someone must be in charge and feel responsible for its success. The coordinator publicizes the dance, reserves the hall (which we regularly use), and sees that cash is on hand (and that there is a cashbox). We announce the dance in the BFMS and



Photo by Mike Franch.

Folklore Society of Greater Washington newsletters, make announcements at dances, and distribute a distinctive dance flyer. A real committee would be helpful, but one person can organize this evening.

2. Callers. The dance is open mic for callers, who give us a mix of contra, English, and the occasional square. The contra-English proportion varies from year to year, depending on who offers to call. As coordinator, I adopt a first-come, first served policy for callers, although alternating contra and English and making sure that we do easier, family-friendly dances early in the evening. There has been a high serendipity level over the years. An occasional, contra-only dancer will be unhappy with

being exposed to English country dance, but we also have contra dancers who are delighted to discover English dance. Depending on how many callers show up, a caller might call one, two, or three dances. It is important to set limits; I tell callers that if the band leader or I think a dance has gone on too long, one of us will signal the band to bring it to a close.

3. Open band. The band is an open band, with a hired leader. BFMS hires pianist Liz Donaldson, whom we can rely on to herd the cats, draw musicians who like playing with her, and carry the evening if few musicians show up. The last seems increasingly unlikely, as for the last several years musicians have filled the stage. Liz suggests selecting tunes, in two-tune medleys, that most of the band knows, adding "It is perfectly okay to play easy tunes all evening." The

English dances generally come from the standard repertoire. The musicians seem to have a very good time, even if the evening calls for sometimes playing a less-preferred genre. (I promised an old-timey musician that I would never tell anyone that he played an English country dance!)

4. Keep it simple. We amplify only the caller, using a small, easy-to-use Fender Passport sound system. Our space allows us to use the honor system for the gate, which works well in our setting; another group might want to

recruit gate volunteers. We have a maximum rate for families. Callers pay (they dance more than they call); musicians don't pay (they typically play the whole time). The basic design of our dance flyer, prominently featuring a turkey at the microphone, stays the same from year to year, making it easily recognizable.

Attendance and the mix of attendees has varied from year to year, but the dance seems reliably established as a "must do" Thanksgiving night activity. Facebook buzzed with photos and favorable comments after the 2009 dance (see www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=123710&id=624238756&ref=pb). The coordinator will be anxious before the 2010 dance, but he isn't doubtful that it will be a successful event.