Hands Four

by Greg Rohde

There are a lot of good articles about contra dancing on the web and which have appeared in various newsletters from time to time, including this one. "Hands Four" was written by CDSS member Greg Rohde of St. Louis, Missouri, for The Commonspace, a local grassroots civics and culture publication, for people not familiar with the dance form; however, the pleasure the author takes in describing the mental and physical delights of the dance, I think, will appeal to the dancers among us.

~ Editor

If I'm ever in a coma, somebody announce "Hands Four" and start shuffling your feet. If that doesn't bring a smile to my face or get my toes tapping, then you know I'm beyond hope.

"Hands four" is the traditional call that begins every contra dance: an invitation to find a partner, join a long line of people and join hands with a neighboring couple. Small groups of four are formed all the way down the line and dancers eagerly wait for instructions. The caller announces a series of moves and the dancers walk through the dance a couple of times. When the dancers are comfortable with the sequence of moves, the band starts playing, the caller calls the figures and the dancers put it all into a fluid motion. What happens next is pure magic. For the next ten minutes, the dancers meet, separate, weave, reunite and swing. Experienced dancers will adjust to their partner or neighbor, dancing more simply with newer dancers and adding embellishments with experienced ones. At the end of it all, everyone thanks their partner, finds a new partner and lines up for another dance.

How did I get hooked?

I stumbled into contra dancing by accident. About fifteen years ago, a friend asked me if I had ever contra danced. I gave her a quizzical look, wondered about the funny name and asked if it was a Central American militaristic thing. Her description made no sense to me, but it did pique my curiosity. A couple weeks later, I called to see if she was going to the dance that night. When she said "No," I asked her for directions and went by myself.

What I discovered that July night was wonderful live music that compels me to move, a community that extends great hospitality to new dancers and a style of dance that is very easy to learn. Much of contra's popularity is in its simplicity: if you can walk, you can contra dance. It doesn't matter if you have two left feet. (Contra dancing uses a walking step so it doesn't matter which left foot you start on.) I was thrilled to encounter a place where the whole community dancing together is more important than any one person or any couple looking good. I had previously taken some dance lessons that were horrible because the instructor kept chastising us for every small mistake. Worrying about getting each step right meant that the evening caused more stress than it relieved. The contra dance floor, on the other hand, was a playful oasis. Everyone was very patient with teaching someone who was new, had no idea what was going on and lacked a good sense of rhythm. I was hooked. Since then, it's seeped into my blood as I've danced thousands of dances and have discovered a source of deep joy and great playfulness.

What is contra dancing?

Contra dancing is a communal folk dance in which you and your partner dance, eventually, with everyone else in the hall. Before the dance starts, you and a partner join a long line of couples and take hands with a couple that's next to you. A caller will lead you through a series of moves. After you've gone through the series once, you and your partner have switched places with the other couple and the two of you have a new couple to dance with, and so on.

The caller's role is to guide and support you through the dances. Most callers start an evening with the easiest dances and teach every new move as it gets introduced into the night's repertoire. Think of contra as a language with about sixteen main words that are combined in a variety of ways to make sentences. You start with simple sentences and build from there. The caller's goal is to set you up for success. He or she will walk you through a sequence of moves a few times until you are comfortable and confident. Once the music starts, the caller may prompt you with cues so you can remember the next move. Since the dance is a pre-arranged set of moves, you don't need to decide what the next move will be. This simplicity is one of contra's advantages over other styles of dance,

where the leader (usually the man) has to be constantly thinking about what the next move will be. In contra, that decision is already made, so you can turn off that part of your brain and simply be present to the music, your partner and your fellow dancers. If you're an experienced dancer, you can throw in embellishments and make the dance even more challenging and more fun. Since the dance is a combination of a series of moves, the partner you're with, the other people in your line and the band that's playing, you never do the same dance twice. Some of the moves are similar to square dancing (swing your partner, make a star, chain the women — a move that sounds more kinky than it is) while others are unique to contra. I usually downplay the similarities because contra differs greatly from most people's mental pictures of square dancing or their grade school experience of it. We always dance to live music and don't wear square dance costumes. Square dancing involves four couples dancing in a group while a contra line can accommodate as many couples as space allows. In a typical contra evening, there will often be one or two square dances and even a pair of waltzes.

Since contra is a social form of dancing, even people who come with a date change partners after each dance. This makes it an ideal dance form for people who come alone. You don't have to worry about "Who will I dance with?" Once you're on the floor, you'll dance with everyone. Asking or getting asked to dance has less pressure than in other styles of dance. In contra, asking someone to dance usually doesn't carry romantic connotations. Remember in any given night you might have ten or twelve different partners. (On the other hand, others have found their lifelong partner on the dance floor.) It's also acceptable for women to take the initiative and ask men to dance. Lastly, more than in other dance styles, you and your partner can have very different skill levels and still enjoy dancing together.

Some people refer to contra as "an eye contact sport." While part of this is functional (looking into your partner's eyes prevents dizziness when spinning), part of this is a result of the friendly nature of these dances. Since part of the enjoyment is being with others, most dancers will look you in the eye and smile. Where else can you go and have people smile at you for a couple of hours? It's hard to not feel good about yourself after being showered with that kind of affirmation. One thing I love about the dance communities I've encountered across the country is that they seem to be groups filled with genuine affection.

I like the whimsical definitions of contra. My favorite is "an amusement park ride we make for ourselves." We all work together and create something that takes us for a ride. It's even more fun than the "Scrambler" or "Tilt-A-Whirl" you rode as a child. Another description is "the only form of dance in which a member of the opposite sex is thrust in your arms every thirty seconds." One iconoclastic friend defines it as "a sinless sport in which you sweat with many partners." All of these definitions hint at a secret of contra: the magic increases as we keep a little tension in our arms. With this dynamic tension, we can gently push and pull each other along and act as one unified body.

When I was a kid, I had a board game that could entertain me for hours. The motto on the box was: "a minute to learn, a lifetime to master." Like that childhood game, contra dancing can be learned in a few minutes. Since the goal of contra is to have fun, it's heretical to speak of "mastering" it. I can say, however, that even with fifteen years of experience, I'm excited at the subtleties I'm still learning. In contra dancing, a "good" dancer isn't one who can do fancy moves or who never makes a mistake. A good contra dancer is one who enjoys the dance immensely, adapts to his/her partner smoothly, recovers from mistakes playfully, helps his/her partner "look good" gracefully and, most importantly, increases the joy of everyone else in the line easily.

Why do people enjoy contra?

I enjoy contra dancing because it's a place where time stands still. I can dance for hours and it seems like a minute. It's a place where I can turn off my brain and just relax. Contra dancing, like no other activity, compels me to live in the present. When I'm dancing, I'm not regretting the past or worried about the future. I'm totally focused on the present, a discipline that leads to happiness.

I enjoy contra because it's one of the places where I feel most alive. It's impossible to be unhappy after three hours of people looking you straight in the eyes and smiling. Contra dance is playful and fun, a place where adults can be kids. I enjoy contra because it's a dance style where it's more important to have fun than to do it right, it's simple enough that beginners learn very quickly and it allows experienced dancers and beginners to enjoy being partners together.

I love contra dance because it's a communal event. The focus is on the whole group dancing together, an entire line playing in unison. The live music is compelling, the moves are simple and the sense of moving as a group

is awesome.

Other people who dance a lot are very enthusiastic about it. You'll hear descriptions such as:

"I love meeting people in a smoke-free, alcohol-free, meat market-free environment."

"When my co-dancers and I are in the groove, I feel like we're trapeze artists. I love the 'Zoom.'"

"The music is irresistible and often hypnotic. I love being compelled to smile."

"It's amazing to have so much fun with people I have never met before."

"It's an adrenaline rush that lasts for days."

"I love the contact on so many different levels: the feel of other people's balance, transfer of weight, a safe sense of touch and genuine eye contact."

"It's like flying."

"The most fun part of my exercise program."

"It's less stressful than other dance forms where the man has to continually be thinking ahead to the next move."

"Ecstasy — the state, not the drug."

"I'm touched by the communication that happens without any words."

"Transcendent — the closest I get to organized religion."

"People who come here have a genuine friendliness that's refreshing."

"I enjoy turning my brain off for a couple of hours and melting into the music."

What type of person would like contra?

Contra appeals to a wide variety of people. Gregarious folks love interacting with dozens of people in a few minutes. Shy people enjoy meeting others without needing to talk much. Analytical people admire the intricate patterns we effortlessly form while more emotional folks enjoy the personal bonding. Athletic people enjoy the energetic style of dance while sedentary people enjoy the most fun way to get in shape without really trying.

What can I expect at my first dance?

Although the dances are easy, most first timers appreciate a chance to learn the basic moves and gain a little confidence. Your best bet is to arrive early and attend the workshop. If you can't attend the workshop, come for the first dances. The earliest dances are the simplest and the callers will provide even more instructions. One of the worst things you can do is say, "I'll sit out the first ones and watch." This can intimidate some if they focus on the intricate patterns of the whole group instead of the simple moves of each individual.

If two of you are newcomers, resist your urge to be partners for the first few dances. The easiest way for new people to learn is by dancing with experienced partners. Experienced dancers will gladly help you and the two of you can line up as neighbors when you take "hands four." You'll want to dress comfortably and avoid wearing long sleeves because you can get quite hot. Many people wear jeans or shorts. Some women wear skirts or light dresses because they look beautiful while twirling. Be sure to wear comfortable shoes.

St. Louis is fortunate to have a great dance community with a deep pool of talented musicians and callers. St. Louis hosts a contra dance every weekend at the Monday Club in Webster Groves. A contra schedule can be found at www.childgrove.org. Mention this article and your first dance is free. St. Louis even hosts two dance weekends each year where you can literally dance 'til dawn. Dance weekends may attract four hundred people from all parts of the country. "Dance Gypsies," those who attend several weekends a year, end up forming great friendships with others who share their passion for dance. One unique dynamic about the national contra community is that you may recognize someone's face and remember how much fun you had with them a year ago at this same dance weekend. You may not have seen this person in a year, and unless you chatted a lot with them last year, you may not know this person's last name, occupation, religion, political persuasion, their family or any of the typical things you know about people you enjoy spending time with. Since the dance floor is a great unifier, none of those things matter.

In addition to enjoying weekend dance festivals, many experienced dancers also find a dance when traveling out of town for work or pleasure. As a seasoned dancer, I always enjoy showing up in a new city, finding a dance community and enjoying their hospitality. It's also fun if they ask, "Is this your first time here?" I can honestly tell them, "Yes, it is" and let them assume I'm a newbie. Usually, by the time the first couple of dances are over, they figure out this isn't my first time on the dance floor.

If you like having fun, are willing to try new things, and have a playful spirit, join us some weekend for a

contra dance. When you hear “hands four,” introduce yourself to a new partner, smile and hang on for the ride.

When Greg’s not contra dancing or waltzing, you can find him listening intently to others, connecting people and resources, enjoying a good pun, cycling through Forest Park or enjoying the sunset with his wonderful wife, Julie. He can reached at grjmj@swbell.net. Childgrove Country Dancers hold square and contra dances on first, third and fourth Sunday evenings in Webster Groves, Missouri; see their website below. This article appeared in The Commonspace (www.thecommonspace.org/2002/06/games.php) in June 2002 and was reprinted with permission in the CDSS News, issue #170, January/February 2003.

Resources and Background Information

- St. Louis Dance Information (Childgrove Country Dancers’ website): www.childgrove.org.
- Ted Crane’s National Grid for Dances by Day of the Week: www.tedcrane.com/DanceDB/NationalGrid.com?day=1,6,7
- Ted Crane’s National Database of Dance Locations: tedcrane.com/DanceDB/ListDance.com/
- Google’s Web Directory for Contra: http://directory.google.com/Top/Arts/Performing_Arts/Dance/Folk_Dancing/Contradance/
- A Contra Dance Webring: http://x.webring.com/ hub?ring=contraring&list
- Kiran Wagle’s Dance Page (articles, photos, links): www.io.com/~entropy/contradance/dance-home.html
- Dan Klarmann’s Dance Page (articles, photos, links): www.danklarmann.com/dance.htm
- What Is Contra Dancing? (Chattahoochee Country Dancers’ website): www.contradance.org/ccd_what.html
- Why Is It Called Contra? (Leslie Hyll’s website): www.geocities.com/Heartland/3382/whatis.html#whycontra
- Learning to Contra Dance (Gary Shapiro’s website): www.sbcds.org/contradance/whatis/#Learn
- Six Definitions of Contra Dance (Gary Shapiro’s website): www.sbcds.org/contradance/whatis/#Defs
- A Contra Dance Primer (Hamilton Country Dancers’ website): www.freenet.hamilton.on.ca/link/jig/a_contra_dancers_primer.htm
- The History of Contra Dancing (Chip Hedler’s website): homepages.together.net/~chiph/about/history.htm
- Descriptions of Dance Figures (Chip Hedler’s website): homepages.together.net/~chiph/about/figures.htm
- 28 Ways to Swing Your Partner (Chip Hedler’s website): homepages.together.net/~chiph/about/swingpos.htm
- A Caller’s Description of a Few Dances (Marilee Standifer’s website): sprott.physics.wisc.edu/marilee/
- An Animated Diagram of a Dance (Seattle Folk Dance/Matt Fisher’s website): www.seattledance.org/contra/design/
- A Mathematical Approach (Ivars Peterson’s website): www.sciencenews.org/sn_arc97/6_14_97/mathland.htm
- A Diagram of “Long Lines” (Chattahoochee Country Dancers’ website): www.contradance.org/ccd_images/dance_diagram.gif