

# CDSS Lifetime Contributor—Chuck Ward

by Sharon Green



Chuck Ward came by his musicianship naturally. As a small boy in Kentucky, he accompanied his auctioneer uncle to estate auctions, where his father and uncles would liven up the proceedings by playing music and leading the crowd in circle dances—“play party games,” as they were called in the Bible Belt. Soon Chuck

joined them, playing any pump organ that was being auctioned off and, when an organ didn't work, opening it up to fix it.

As a young musician, Chuck was self-taught. That changed on what he calls the luckiest day of his life, the day his mother met University of Kentucky School of Music Professor Ford Montgomery and told him about her keyboard-playing son. Ford Montgomery agreed to hear the thirteen-year old perform, and, after listening to Chuck play from memory a Bach two-part invention, the professor enrolled Chuck in a special university program that had him attending high school and studying piano and organ at the School of Music simultaneously for the next four years.

Throughout college, Chuck devoted himself to the organ. First at the conservatory at Syracuse University, then at the University of Michigan, from which he was graduated in 1957, he studied the classical organ repertoire. After a brief stint in the army, he served an apprenticeship at the Reuter Organ Company, learning organ construction and repair. It was not until 1960, when he returned to Kentucky to pursue a degree in Industrial Arts at Berea College, that he reconnected with the folk music and dance of his childhood.

It was Ethel Capps, director of Berea College's Recreation Extension Program and coach of the Berea College Country Dancers demonstration team, who first found out that Chuck had played for dances. She quickly recruited him to accompany the Berea Dancers and began introducing him to the wider world of country dancing. “I want Phil to hear you play,” she said, and she proceeded to drive Chuck to Brasstown,

North Carolina where he met Phil Merrill, who became a lifelong friend. Phil in turn invited Chuck to come to Pinewoods the next year, thereby beginning Chuck's long association with the Country Dance and Song Society.

**“This is an accordion, and you have until Saturday night to learn to play it!”**

*~ Ethel Capps, Recreation Extension Director of Berea College, quote from the early 1960s*

Over the next several years in Kentucky, Chuck became increasingly involved with English and American country dancing. He played at Pinewoods, at the John C. Campbell School in Brasstown, and at Berea's Christmas Country Dance School, working with May Gadd, Genny Shimer, Frank Warner, and a host of other dance and song leaders. In 1969, when he moved from Kentucky to California, he searched for any contras or English dances, but there were none in Northern California. There was Scottish dancing in San Francisco, taught by C. Stewart Smith, who had his own studio; there was international folk dancing as well, with advanced classes at Chang's led by Madelynne Greene, founder of the Mendocino Folklore Camp. Chuck quickly became known to these dance leaders and was asked to play for folk dancing and to teach English country dance at Folklore Camp.

The summer of 1970 marked a turning point for Chuck. At Folklore Camp he had become close to Stewart Smith and Nora Hughes, who had taken charge of the camp after Greene's sudden death. When the generator failed and the battery-powered



Claremont Country Dance Band, 1982, (l-r) Stan Kramer, Liz Dreisbach, Derek Booth, Marshall Barron, Peter Persoff, Chuck Ward, Phoebe Barron; photo: Phoebe Barron. Photo of Chuck at top left: Sharon Green.

phonograph eventually gave out, Chuck played Scottish and Irish tunes on the accordion and wound up teaching Fandango and Goddesses to an enthusiastic crowd. It became clear to him that, if English country dancing was to take root in Northern California, he had to do more than just make music: he had to teach, and he had to organize.

In October 1970, the English Country Dance Society of San Francisco held its first event, a dance at Stewart Smith's studio, which Chuck obtained rent free in exchange for playing for Smith's Scottish dance classes. Tom Kruskal taught; Chuck played; Nora Hughes managed the dance. The next year Chuck became organist at Trinity Methodist Church in San Francisco, and shortly thereafter convinced the church to rent space to the fledgling dance. Later, while installing an organ at St. Clement's Episcopal Church in Berkeley, Chuck discovered that the rector, the Reverend Gordon Griffiths, had been a morris dancer during his Oxford days. Griffiths had a fondness for English dancing, and it was not long before the San Francisco ECD found a new home in Berkeley, where, thanks to St. Clement's closeness to the university and to the arrival on the scene of a lively young caller named Brad Foster, the dance flourished, attracting a young, vigorous crowd.

**“Mister Ward, your reels are fine, your strathspeys are exemplary, but your jigs need work.”**

*~ Miss Jean Milligan, cofounder of the Scottish CDS quote from the early 1970s*

Throughout the 1970s, Chuck played for international folk dances, Scottish dances, contras, and his regular English dance. At the English dance he was joined by a growing number of local musicians, among them Lea Brilmayer, Peter Persoff, Derek Booth, Liz Dreisbach, Stan and Susan Kramer, and, in the early '80s, Phoebe Barron, daughter of Marshall Barron, Chuck's great friend. During these years Chuck and his band The Claremont Country Dance Band, joined by Marshall, recorded their classic albums “Popular English Country Dances of the 17th and 18th Centuries” and “Juice of Barley—Simple English Country Dances,” produced by CDSS.

The 1980s saw major changes in Northern

California's country dance scene. Chuck and Nora Hughes' ECDS of San Francisco was the forerunner of a new organization, the Bay Area Country Dance Society, a union of the contra and English dances then existing in the greater Bay Area. The Berkeley dance continued as part of the umbrella organization. Starting in 1980 with the first Mendocino Dance Week, BACDS ran annual weeklong dance camps at which Chuck often played a major role as musician, band leader, and teacher.

**“How would you like to play for a contra weekend with Cathy Whitesides—in Alaska?”**

*~ Brad Foster, then a Bay Area caller, quote from the late 1970s or early 1980s*

In the '80s and '90s, Chuck traveled up and down the West Coast, playing his music and teaching others to make music as well. Invited by Ken McFarland, he returned to Alaska, playing for dances in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and in Southeast Alaska. On occasional trips to the East Coast, he taught and played at Pinewoods, enjoying reunions with his many dance friends. In 1996, together with Lydee Scudder and Mark Carroll, Chuck cofounded the Sebastopol English country dance, and in 2002 he was chosen to play at the North Bay CDS's first major English country dance event, the Mad Robin Ball.

Two thousand six was a gala year for Chuck. Combining his two great loves, the organ and English country dance, he produced a solo CD “The Vital Organ: English Country Dances of the 17th & 18th Centuries.” Among the tunes on that CD was Daphne, the tune for the dance Hit and Miss, the first English country dance Chuck ever danced. Chuck also played at Mendocino English Week



Top: Chuck with Gene Murrow, English Week at Pinewoods, 1994; photo: David Green. Below (l-r): Marshall Barron, Chuck, Eric Leber, recording session at Bay Records, 1980; photo: Mike Cogan.

that year. On the last night of camp at the English Week Banquet he learned that, in celebration of the release of his CD and of his retirement that year as organist at Church of the Incarnation, BACDS had launched a campaign to create an outreach fund for the training of musicians.

Today the Chuck Ward Fund is administered by the Country Dance and Song Society. As part of CDSS's New Leaders, Good Leaders initiative, it helps to support music workshops and other training programs for both experienced and novice country dance musicians. Just as Chuck has reached out to his fellow musicians throughout his career, the Chuck Ward Fund is a way for the dance community to reach out to musicians on all levels. The fund has given much to musicians. But it can never match Chuck's great gifts to his musician friends:

**“His great sense of humor and wonderful snicker. (His ability to keep) the band amused with sotto voce comments about the callers, dancers, the music, or anything else that tickled or disturbed him at the time.”**

~ Gene Murrow

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:**  
Thanks to the following friends of Chuck Ward who generously shared their photographs and stories of Chuck (posted on CDSS's website; see below) for this article: Marshall Barron, Helene Cornelius, David Green, Wayne Hankin, Nikki Herbst, Stan and Susan Kramer, Tom Kruskal, David Means, Gene Murrow, Fred Perner, Michael Siemon, Erin Vang. ~ S.G.



Chuck and Mary Lea discussing a point, Mendocino, 2006; photo: David Green.

## A Tribute

Chuck Ward was the person who suggested to me, years ago, that “part-books” would be a real service to the dance musician. By now there are several books, and they do enable many people to join the band and experience playing for dancing.

But if I am in California, or if Chuck is at Pinewoods, I prefer to see only the tune with no arrangement on the piano rack, for then I know that I will hear brilliant, subtle, outrageous, transcendent wonderments from the keyboard, distilled from the folk songs of Kentucky, the organ repertoire of Baroque Germany, choral music through the centuries, long friendship with Phil Merrill, great hands, and an immensely creative mind.

One of Chuck's great talents is to transform printed notes into cascades of infectious vitality and great beauty. The feet of the dancers become more and more silent, as they are lifted from the floor by the music, and the faces of the dancers glow with pleasure as

they dance the figures, encounter friends, and feel the excitement generated by the music.

But the musicians are transported beyond themselves, having these great tunes flow through them to the dance floor, meanwhile having heightened awareness of the support, the sophistication, the genius of that master musician, Charles Ward.

~ Marshall Barron, “Dedication” to *The Splendid Shilling: English Country Dances Arranged by Marshall Barron*, © 1996.

The presentation of CDSS's Lifetime Contribution Award to Chuck Ward will take place on the afternoon of March 28, 2010, at St. Clement's Church in Berkeley, where Chuck and Brad Foster presided over many dances in the 1970s. For lots of great stories about Chuck, see our website when this article is posted in January, [www.cdss.org/current-issue.html](http://www.cdss.org/current-issue.html). To hear him, CDSS carries both CDS 7 and CDS 9 (cassettes only at this time) and “The Vital Organ” (CD) in our store, [www.cdss.org/store-home.html](http://www.cdss.org/store-home.html). To donate to the Chuck Ward Musicians Training Fund, please go to our website and click on Donate to CDSS.

*Formerly active in New York where she cofounded Country Dance New York's True Brit weekend, Sharon Green now calls and organizes dances in the San Francisco Bay Area, and books Chuck Ward whenever she can.*

## What Others Say about Chuck Ward: Comments and Stories

### Stanley Kramer, Sunnyvale CA

When an artist has mastered several styles, as Chuck has, you just have to stand there in wonderment. I'm thinking specifically of how Chuck plays certain English country dance melodies in that smoky cocktail lounge style. The mastery of that musical style came to him early on, for he played the electric organ in lounges in several southern states years before he was old enough to drink (legally). In his mastery of baroque ornamentation, he has no peers.

Chuck is an organist and organ builder. He was organist at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco for twenty years, and at Church of the Incarnation in Santa Rosa for over a dozen years more. On moving to San Francisco in 1969, he took a job with the firm Swain and Kates, building and refurbishing pipe organs throughout Northern California; today, he and a partner own the firm.

For forty years Chuck has rented a walk-up apartment on Russian Hill in San Francisco. He enjoys the confidence of the landlord who authorized Chuck's making some serious modifications to the architecture, to wit, ripping out the Murphy bed and filling the resulting "hole in the wall" with a pipe organ, which he fashioned. (The longest pipe is four inches. Lower notes are played on reeds.)

*in•stru•ment*     *n.* 1. A mechanical device or contrivance; a tool; an implement. 2. A contrivance for producing musical sounds. 3. A thing with or by which something is effected; a means; an agency.

You just have to allow that my friend Chuck Ward is instrumental in the broadest sense of the word. He builds fine musical instruments. He is the most accomplished instrumentalist. But beyond that he is the "can do" kid. Through his vision, his ability, his resourcefulness, his dedication, he makes the good things happen.

### Erin Vang, Oakland CA

I knew Chuck Ward first as a classical musician and only much later as a folk musician--and that's actually his fault.

For as long as I can remember, I've been running into Chuck at church gigs, where he distinguished himself with tasteful registrations and tactful leadership from the sidelines. About ten years ago I spent a fabulous day at his Occidental

spread playing chamber music in all kinds of ensembles with Chuck and his friends. It was great fun, both musically and socially, and ever since that day I've made a point of wandering over to the organ to catch up with Chuck. That night over potluck, Chuck told me about his folk music habit, but I'd never heard of English country dance before, so it all flew over my head.

A few years later, though, that conversation came back to haunt me. I'd just arrived at a Berkeley Beginning ECD evening, because my new girlfriend at the time was trying to get me interested in dancing and there was my organist friend Chuck Ward at the piano! Not that I heard what he was playing, baffled as I was by the activities on the floor! I got through a few dances before my addled brain and five left feet gave out, and then I wandered over to the piano to say hi to Chuck. He introduced me to the fiddler du soir, David Strong, and said it was too bad I didn't have my horn along.

I actually did have my horn along--I'd driven back from a gig with the San Jose Symphony just in time for the dance. He insisted that I sit in--which I did, delighted to have an excuse to stay away from the scary dance floor. Although I'd never seen a Barnes book in my life, it wasn't that different from reading jazz charts or fake books of standards, so I had a great time goofing off with Chuck and David. I think quite a few people at the dance that night were justifiably horrified by the incursion of a brass instrument into their tranquil society, but Chuck loved it--and that was good enough for Jocelyn Reynolds, who promptly added me to the Mendocino English week staff for the summer.

Although I knew the basics of jamming in a small combo, I didn't know all the unwritten rules of ECD band etiquette. Chuck found subtle ways to clue me in, though, and generously poured both wisdom and red wine down my throat just about every night at camp. He answered all my questions, soothed all my little ego's ruffled feathers, and flattered me into thinking that most of what I was learning from him was my idea in the first place. I also was wrestling with a few personal dilemmas that week, and Chuck poured yet more wisdom and red wine into me. He made it feel like two old friends gossiping and giggling in front of a crackling fire, but I always left his cabin with my problems squared away and my mood light. He'd just had a major medical crisis and could barely walk that

summer, but that didn't stop him from entertaining and taking care of everybody else all week.

I had the great privilege of reading half a dozen horn-piano pieces with Chuck before dinner that week. I'd donated a serenade to the auction, which Brooke Friendly bought and decided to share with everybody at camp. It's always a treat when you get to read with such a great musician, and Chuck's sense of humor made it even more fun. I'll never forget when we turned the page to find Bach's "Air in G," and Chuck decided to use the cheesy harpsichord patch on the "appliance" (as he called it) that took the place of a piano in the dining hall. I was trying to compose myself for the horn's quiet, sustained entrance when Chuck started giggling about how horrible the fake harpsichord sounded and announced to everyone, "I'm going straight to hell for this!" The horn isn't supposed to sound percussive for the first several bars, but I couldn't help it. Later he made use of the cheesy harp patch for a Romantic-era ditty, and again we all had to giggle about our future voyage to hell.

Chuck has a special gift for knowing exactly the right tempo for a tune--the tempo at which the music breathes and the dance flows. Some musicians get the tempo right for the dancers, others get the tempo right for the music; Chuck gets it right for both. Even for a squirrely tune like "Fandango," Chuck nails it every time. Part of his knack, of course, comes from knowing the dances and remembering how fast his feet would be going if he weren't sitting at the keyboard. But it's also a musical instinct--a recognition of the speed at which a tune makes musical sense and where it lies under the fingers--that he has honed throughout his lifelong multi-threaded career as both a classically-trained church organist (who's sold "Mister Isaac's Maggot" as recessional march to many a bride) and as an unabashed folk musician.

If Chuck's going to be there, going straight to hell doesn't sound like such a bad idea.

### **Wayne Hankin, Newport VT**

This October I was invited to play for BACDS's Fall Frolick. Playing on the west coast is a chance to work with new and familiar musicians. Among the musicians new to me, easily the most colorful was Chuck Ward. On first appearance Chuck strikes one as one of those sweet old grandfatherly types. That impression didn't last.

Although I knew next to nothing about Chuck, the moment he played, the first thing that came into my head was the name "Philip Merrill" and a style of piano playing I'd not heard in over twenty years, since a time when I was down in

Brasstown, North Carolina. There in the '80s Philip's style of playing was firmly etched onto the dance hall stage. At Brasstown, I heard a style of English that mixed beautiful rambling with wisecracking fill-ins. The words naughty, lively and energetic are as close as I can get to describe it, but you can't. You really have to be there. That weekend Philip and I talked about style and the future of English dance in the United States. I didn't know it then but that would be the first and last time I would see and hear him.

So now that I know Chuck is around, I don't feel so bad. He's as etched in my mind as Phil ever was. Solid playing blended with that same wisecracking fill-in style, and of course you always know the downbeat will be there without its having to be pounded out. What a pleasure to work with a musician who has the sensitivity to make your playing look good, but who leaves room for some naughtiness to sneak into the mix. Chuck and I spent the next two days exchanging stories and learning each other's history. I'm a fan of collectable moments but Chuck is no antique. He's as vital and colorful as any other musician out there, and I urge people to go listen to that wonderful style because when it comes down to it, you can have the best dancers in the house but if the music has no life, it's an empty hall. Judging the crowd over that weekend, I'd say Chuck easily fills the hall.

### **Fred Perner, Santa Barbara CA**

Big, dark, loud, and threatening --- Chuck Ward? .... well, yes. Pub Night, 1981 Mendocino English Week was interrupted with the loud roar of motorcycles and the uninvited presence of three dark figures in black leather with chains! And clubs! I was alarmed and worried for the other campers and wondered how Brad Foster was going to rid the camp of this menace. Two big fellows and their moll crashed our intimate party, stopped the morris, laughed at our serving wenches, generally impressed us with their dominance, and then disappeared as quickly as they came. It wasn't until the following day that I learned that those very bad bikers were none other than Chuck Ward and his cohorts Flip Alpern and Nikki Herbst, doing what they do best--giving us an unforgettable camp experience.

### **Nikki Herbst, Iowa City IA**

Not surprisingly, all the time I spent with Chuck Ward was fun. Every year, back when, he would carry an electronic keyboard to his cabin at

Mendocino English Week, and we'd get together to play Bach, Quantz, Telemann, and Handel sonatas for flute and piano. Sometimes we'd play for the rest of the camp, but mostly we just played for the love of playing and the fun of gossiping in between numbers. The most fun performance I can recall was one Fourth of July celebration when I was on music staff and we played "The Stars and Stripes Forever" at uproarious volume as the campers did a Grand March—campers were waving flags and clapping thunderously while I played the ear-splitting piccolo part and Chuck was the whole rest of the marching band, which was of course no problem for him. Quiet or noisy, it was always fun playing music with Chuck.

You know someone's had a lifelong effect when you can trace some of your own pet sayings to that person. I still think of Chuck (and hear his eyebrows-up, professorial tone) when, perilously under-ready for some performance, I hear myself say, "At the risk of over-rehearsal, let's call it done." Likewise, though many people say it, it was from Chuck that I learned the almost always true "No good deed goes unpunished!" With his maniacal laugh echoing in my head, it's easier to bear the muck I'm usually in when that expression pops out. Thanks, Chuck.

I share the following paragraph in response to a specific request from Sharon. Some may remember that Pub Night at the Mendocino camps used to be a fairly elaborate affair, with many costumed participants, skits, decorations, and lots of food and drink to go with the singing and joke telling. One year Fred Perner asked a group of four of us if we would be willing to show up as punks and bust up the party a bit, just for something different. We (all younger and thinner then) got ourselves into tight black leather clothes, dark glasses, and some pretty scary jewelry, our hair spiked menacingly. Chuck, who used to ride his motorcycle to camp, was all over this thing. I rode on the back of that big bike, holding onto Chuck as hard as I could, and with a roar Chuck drove us right into the middle of the pub. While he gunned the motor menacingly, the rest of us walked around creating havoc for a few minutes before I climbed back on the bike and we roared back out. Some people were so astonished they didn't know who had just invaded the party. Oddly, we were never asked to do it again. Again, thanks, Chuck!

### **Marshall Barron, New Haven CT**

Charles Ward has been one of my best friends ever since we first met at Pinewoods a zillion years ago. Besides having a fabulous sense of humor (and a zillion jokes), he also has enormous insight and knowledge. I treasure his friendship.

Once years ago, Chuck was in Newbiggin [at Pinewoods Camp] to play English country dances on his accordion. With one hand, he grabbed one of the low-lying beams, hauled himself up, and played the first few bars of "Newcastle" with the other hand.

Once he injured a finger when a beam used in organ-construction fell the wrong way. The next day he had to play in church, accompanying Bach's Mass in B Minor. There was no time to refinger it. "What did you do?" "I thought about it."

When Chuck visited Grace and me in New Haven, we went to the prestigious Instrument Collection, and I was amused to hear the verbal badminton between Chuck and the curator. Each would try to outdo the other with knowledge about the instruments there, and Chuck always won. When they came to a small portative organ, which had a very limited amount of air (there were now two more curators, pretending not to listen), Chuck was asked to play something for them. So he played "Daphne" ("Hit or Miss"), with delicacy and accuracy, and planned the tempo for the whole piece so that, on the very last chord, the pitch drooped, as the instrument ran out of air. (They were duly impressed, and Grace and I were so proud!!!)

One further remembrance: Scene: Skit night at Mendocino Dance Camp. Chuck had found what he termed 'a trash violin' in a warehouse, and he fixed it up with match-heads glued to the bridge, and a strip of emery paper glued to the bow. He 'played' the violin at skit night, with Stan Kramer, off-stage, playing a soulful melody, when suddenly Chuck tipped the bow, and the violin burst into flames. Horrified gasps from the audience! To be followed by even more horrified gasps when he dunked the violin into a conveniently placed bucket of water. Followed rapidly by someone grabbing the violin out of the water. Chuck protested, "But that's just a trash violin!" "I know; but I want to do that trick when I get back to England!"