

Roots Contra: Celebrating the Traditional Roots of Modern Contra Dancing

By Diane Silver, Laura Lengnick, and Karen Gaughan

(Asheville, NC)

“What IS that MUSIC you’re playing?” asked the young dancer at the end of a great night of contra dancing at the Old Farmers’ Ball in Asheville, NC. “It’s traditional New England contra dance music,” I replied. “It’s fantastic,” said the young dancer. “I never imagined a band without a drummer could be so much fun to dance to! What did you say this music is again?” I explained that we were playing tunes that have been played for contra dancing since its beginning. “Oh, NOW I understand,” the young dancer replied. “You are playing contra ROOTS music!”

*This young dancer’s enthusiasm for the traditional dance band sound got my attention, as did his name for our music: Contra Roots. This brief conversation brought into clear focus the role that I had been playing as a long-time contra dance musician. I now understood that I have been tending to the core of the tradition, keeping alive the essential quality of contra dance that meant the most to me: **the beautiful interplay between music and movement in service to community**. In that brief moment, the idea for Roots Contra was born.*

—Laura Lengnick

Contra dancing, like many genres of social dance, can be roughly categorized as “historic” or “modern.” While some dance groups aim to recreate the style of a particular era, others enjoy a continual evolution of style and culture, resulting in a truly living tradition. Asheville’s weekly contra dances have long inhabited the leading edge of this evolution in contra dance, with strong swing, blues, bluegrass, jazz, pop, rock, old-time, tango, and techno influences shaping a unique community of dancers and musicians.

While this evolution is essential to maintaining the vitality of a living contra dance tradition, we had a longing for a sort of middle ground between historical dancing and the current scene. We wanted to create a dance experience that celebrated “straight-up” traditional New England fiddle tunes and contra dances. And thus was born ROOTS CONTRA.

Our vision for Roots Contra was shaped by some key values that we believed would distinguish our contra dance from others in the Asheville region:

- **We value dancing in unison** with neighbors, minor sets of 4, the whole long set, and the entire dance floor. This is distinguished from the current style in our region, which is more partner-focused and favors individual creativity over moving in unison.
- **We value dancing that emphasizes the flow** of the figures through the dance. Because an individual contra dancer’s experience is dependent on more than just their partner, personal preferences for traditional flow vs. modern flourish can sometimes be at odds—e.g., neighbors leading a twirl when a standard courtesy turn flows more smoothly into the next move. Roots Contra encourages dancers to cultivate the traditional flow of communal dancing.
- **We value contra dance “chestnuts,”** as a living tradition that links English country dance and contra dance. Chestnuts offer modern contra dancers the experience of moving through figures designed to fit a specific tune, and are a vibrant reminder of our participation in a dance form that has stood the test of time.
- **We value the incredible diversity of dance formations.** As contra dance evenings have evolved to be mostly all contra all the time, dancers rarely have the opportunity to experience the diversity of dance formations that used to be the norm in an evening of dance: contras, squares, circles, mixers, triplets, triple minors, polka, schottische, hambo, and the occasional novelty dance.

- **We value the traditional dance music** of New England, a uniquely American music that draws on the diverse fiddling traditions of the North Atlantic region, to provide the drive and lift perfectly suited to contra dancing. Our house band is a fiddle and piano duo who know the traditional repertoire and enjoy playing “straight-up” New England tunes.
- **We value the art and craft** of contra dance musicianship. Working as a team, we shape the evening to inspire dancing as a community by always attending to the fundamentals: caller varying the mood and pace of the program, and musicians providing a consistent downbeat, playing with lift and drive that propels the dancers through each figure, and choosing melodies that enhance the overall flow of the choreography. In short, the caller and musicians work in service to the dance—always!

So, how did we pull this off in our modern environment of leading-edge contra in Asheville? First, we were lucky that shortly after we got the idea to do a Roots Contra dance, The Old Farmers’ Ball (OFB)—our local contra dance organization—found a lovely small hall at a neighborhood city-owned community center. The OFB invited local callers and musicians to propose ideas for a series of small weekly events that would enrich the community according to the OFB mission. We jumped at the opportunity to include a Roots Contra dance. The OFB paid the annual rental, which was affordable because the city subsidizes the venue, according to their mission. We could not have pursued this without the OFB and the City of Asheville’s support of traditional arts for the community.

The hall also happened to have an acoustic piano (rare in these parts), a small house PA system, and sufficiently good acoustics that the band did not need amplification (thus, no need for a sound tech). We also volunteered our services as managers, caller, and house band. In short, we eliminated nearly all out-of-pocket costs, which enabled us to forego admission and the pressure of drawing large attendance for financial needs. This gave us the freedom to shape the dance according to our vision. The result was a free, monthly dance, in a small hall, offering an intimate evening with the feel of an old-fashioned town-hall dance.

Roots Contra has been a labor of love, and we are delighted that it has gained momentum in our community. After three years, we are now growing the concept of Roots Contra, offering it as an occasional variation in the range

of contra experience at regular weekly dances. We hope it might be a model for sharing the characteristics of dancing that we especially love, within the larger universe of the living tradition of contra dance. Any night can be a Roots night with intentional programming of the dances and music. Why not give it a try in your town? You just might catch a glimpse of Bob McQuillen, tapping his toe in the corner, eating ice cream, and smiling with approval! See an example Roots Contra dance on page 28.



Poetry Contribution

By Alexandra Christine Steffan

THE FIRST CAMP

or

Prayer of a Desperate Folkie for the Assimilation
and Eternal Evocation of the Glory Around Her

Please
let these tunes
settle into my bones
so deep

that my marrow
hums them
even when I move
away from here.

Let those notes and tones I hear
make a home
in the nooks and crannies
of my body;

Let their beauty
pierce my skin
and make little holes,
so that when

the storms
that follow this sunshine
come,
the wind

blows through them,
and instead of creaking
my whole being
will sing.