

NEWS FROM CANADA

Virtual Dancing & the All Hands In Initiative

By Drew Delaware

Toronto is a friendly city, and a creative hotbed. It's a city where people are moving quickly, yet ready to offer assistance at the drop of a hat.

It makes sense, then, that Toronto is where some of the earliest virtual dances at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were born.

The Toronto English Country Dance Assembly (TECDA) started a weekly Friday night dance a couple of weeks after the world closed down, on March 27th. The brainchild of Cathy Campbell and Maxine Louie, the dance quickly gained a following across the continent and beyond.

Toronto Contra Dance (TCD) started a virtual dance in April, around the same time that a couple other communities were launching their dances. Becky Liddle, president of TCD, reached out to the local callers' collective to get things rolling, and Cathy Campbell offered early assistance based on the learnings of the TECDA dance.

The dances, it turned out, were fun, much to many dancers' surprise. While it was clear that virtual dancing certainly wouldn't replace the in-person experience that we all know and love, for many of us, it was an opportunity to move, enjoy great music, connect with other dancers, and imagine our dance hall as we moved around our living rooms.

While the Toronto contra community was incredibly generous with donations to look after bands whose gigs had been cancelled, the new virtual contra dance became a way to further support our musicians. As we all know, many rely on music for income, not to mention the great joy they get performing for dancers.



As the virtual dance trend took off, organizers began sharing their learnings. Zoom was a bit of a minefield, especially in the spring; security was a big issue, and tips and guides were shared to keep dance events safe from Zoom-bombers. Claire Takemori, from the Bay Area Country Dance Society, became a central figure in the effort to collect information and share broadly, and many communities launched events under her tutelage.

A big part of the exploration and experimentation happened, and continues to happen, amongst callers. Completely new questions arose, such as: How do we adjust dances for a living room? What adaptations need to be made so that dancers don't progress and have to figure out how to adjust on the fly?

Tunes were slowed down to a tempo of 110 beats per minute, as we realized dancers couldn't move as quickly without shared weight. Dances with a lot of clockwise motion were discarded or adapted, as people were getting dizzier dancing solo. Dances with a lot of interaction outside of the minor set were also thrown out, as most dancers' living rooms just didn't provide the space to allow for much beyond the set of four.

Callers started congregating, collaborating, and revising dances. Louise Siddons from Scissortail (Oklahoma) launched her Wednesday Walkthroughs; Shared Weight launched an online callers' email list; and an online callers' collective was spearheaded by Claire Takemori to discuss innovative ways to keep virtual dances fun and engaging. Suddenly singlets and doublets were de rigueur. Uncommon figures were reexamined for the virtual dance context. And crossover from other dance traditions was explored.



All told, two clear silver linings emerged from all of this collaboration: callers and organizers were connecting across communities like never before, developing new friendships and networks. And an outpouring of creativity inspired a new look at the dance traditions we all deeply love.

They say that constraints breed creativity—that certainly has been true in our folk dance communities!

The Birth of All Hands In

Through all of this, the Toronto virtual contra dance continued to grow, drawing dancers from across North America and beyond and attracting top talent in both the featured musicians and callers.

Becky Liddle paired up with Drew Delaware, a Toronto caller with a technology background who was enthralled by the challenges and unique questions that virtual dancing brought, and the two tag-teamed to bring the Toronto Virtual Contra to life every two weeks.

Meanwhile, other communities started looking into creating events of their own. But there were barriers to entry, most notably having tech-savvy volunteers, not to mention a paid Zoom license that would allow for a dance event to happen.

We also quickly realized that a lot of “virtual contra groupies” were showing up at all the dances. It was as if each weekend was yet another dance festival, and one could travel the continent from the comfort of their own living room. Most communities didn’t have enough local dancers wanting to dance virtually to warrant their own dance. And with the ability for dancers to join dances anywhere, the calendar had become quite full. This also impacted the musicians, who were relying on donations from those in attendance.

Noticing these issues, Drew and Becky started floating the idea of sharing the Toronto virtual contra dance with other communities.

The idea was simple: participating communities would be provided with a “community room” of their own to connect

and socialize with their community members for half an hour, and then all communities would join the main dance together. At the end of the dance, dancers would have the option to stay for randomized breakout rooms to meet new friends from other communities.

In exchange, participating communities help promote the dance and provide one volunteer to assist with the dance every six to eight weeks. Toronto Contra Dance provides the technology, works with the talent, and coordinates the overall effort. All told, the idea was to ensure it was a very manageable contribution for even the most resource-strapped of communities.

In the first few weeks of opening the Toronto dance to other communities in this way, eight communities have joined the collaborative effort. Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers and Princeton Country Dancers were the first to join, followed by the Valparaiso Oldtime Dance Society, the California Dance Cooperative (Los Angeles), CDNY (New York City), Hands Across (Colorado), a Midwest Collective (supported by Bloomington), and Memphis Contra Dance.

It just so happened that Toronto’s invitation to join All Hands In came as the Mid-Missouri Traditional Dancers’ board was meeting to discuss ideas for holding online events, and staying engaged with their community. According to Cliff White, “we were just coming off our summer break after holding a handful of haphazard online events in the spring. The board immediately and enthusiastically embraced Toronto’s invitation. It seemed like a perfect way to offer our community something beyond what we could offer on the local level. Since there was no financial commitment for our board, and only a modest commitment of volunteer time, that also made the collaboration very attractive. Toronto made it very easy to participate.”

“All Hands In gives us an opportunity to engage with our local dancers. That is one of the most important things for us right now: keeping our local group engaged and involved, at least at some level,” said Cliff.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Jacqui Grennan had been wondering about a way to reach out to local dancers and see how they were doing, especially those who weren’t already participating in Zoom dancing.

“The All Hands In breakout rooms have provided a resource that helps to make this happen. It was really



easy for our community to get involved, because the time, dance schedule, Zoom room, and talent are already lined up for us. I appreciate that the Toronto dance community has set up this new format and invited other communities to participate,” shared Jacqui.

The All Hands In dances have grown to 150-200 dancers every two weeks. Solo dancers and couples are common, with the occasional family or small group tuning in. Some dance off-camera, others joyfully with the camera on, others “pinning” a friend on Zoom or dancing with a stuffed animal. Some folks join just to listen, watch, or socialize.

One dancer recently commented, on the verge of tears, that she had missed contra dance so much when she lost the physical ability to dance; being able to enjoy the music and watch people dance virtually has brought her immeasurable joy, along with the ability to reconnect with her dancing friends.

“There are no expectations about how you should interact. It’s okay to just listen, dance with your video on or off, or play along with the tunes (while muted),” suggests Claire Takemori. “Do whatever is comfortable for you. Most people attending virtual dances are so happy to see friends and meet folks from around the world. We hope it brings you joy, but tears are normal too.”

Online dance will never replace in-person dance and community. But for many of us, it is keeping the spirit of the traditions we love alive—and for that, we are truly grateful.

The All Hands In virtual contra dance is held the second and fourth Saturday of each month, at 7:00 p.m. ET. To see the schedule of All Hands In and other virtual dances, visit the CDSS online events calendar at cdss.org/online-events. If your community would like to discuss joining the All Hands In initiative, please reach out to Becky Liddle at president@tcdance.org.

Drew Delaware is a caller and organizer in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. For a collection of virtual dance resources, please visit drewdelaware.com.

PREVIOUS PAGE: All Hands In screen shot of the Mid-Missouri community breakout room (organized by Molly White). Photo by Bev Bernbaum.

PART TWO

Anti-Racism and the Folk Revival

By Ezra Fischer

This piece was written and published online by long-time CDSS member Ezra Fischer. It has been split into two pieces and abridged. The first half is an analysis of the history of the first folk revival and Cecil Sharp and was published in the fall 2020 issue of the CDSS News. The second half, which follows here, focuses on how our history informs our present and should influence our future. The essay is published in full at ezrafischer.com.

Although the first folk revival was a hundred years ago, many of its core elements are still alive today. Our community rejects urbanism and modernity as fiercely today as Sharp and his cohort did in their time (despite many of us living in cities and being tech workers of some sort—again, just like Sharp and his cohort).

Much of our song repertoire still celebrates and mourns along the same nostalgic lines of the first folk revival. We sing “hoorah for the life of a country boy” and mourn that “the horse’s day is gone.” Our communal sings honor people who have memorized their songs. A piece of paper may be allowed, but looking at a phone is frowned upon. This has barely changed in over 100 years. Nicholas Hiley, Head of Information, British Universities Film & Video Council, writes of Sharp’s time:

The myth of the illiterate folk singer grew in strength. As might be expected, contemporary folk singers possessed not only manuscript notes of songs, but also collections of printed ballad sheets and newspaper clippings containing the words to songs in their repertoire. However, the collectors were so insistent upon folk memory that these resources were carefully concealed, as folk singers realized that it was better to appear to have a considerable memory than a large collection of ballads

(“Ploughboys and Soldiers: the folk song and the gramophone in the British Expeditionary Force 1914-1918” by Nicholas Hiley, Page 64)

