

# News from Canada: Weaving Old-Time Music and Dance into the Fabric of Small Town Life

by Leslie Gotfrit, Community Dance Caller, Calgary, Alberta



*A promenade during the Calgary Old-Time Experience Square Dance (photo by Shona Monfortone)*

Out here in the wild west of Canada, there isn't much in the way of Southern old-time music and dance. It isn't our tradition after all. But a bunch of Appalachian wannabes is slowly changing that with a series of small town dances called Hip To Be Square.

Five years ago, Mike and Anie Hepher were musing with me about creating an old-time style square dance like the one done at the Nimblefingers Bluegrass and Old-Time Music Workshop midweek. From this conversation the first "Kootenay Old-Timey Dance" billed as a "family-friendly square dance party" was born in Fernie, British Columbia, a mountain town better known for skiing and coal mining than dancing. The first hour was family-centered and there was childcare for the second two sets. Beer and snacks for sale. The venue was too small and only half of the sold-out crowd could dance at a time. There were 15 musicians on stage, in thrift shop square dance frocks, shirts and cowboy boots, all having a grand time. I was somewhat green as a caller, the alcohol flowed, the noise was deafening but despite all that, it was a success. While the collective repertoire was ten tunes that were not quite up to speed, it was the beginning of the Kootenay Stringbenders band and the Hip To Be Square Old-Time Dance.

Many sold-out dances later we have refined the concept. We've clarified our mandate—to develop a traditional dancing and musical community in southern Alberta and eastern British Columbia. We have a brand, a logo and poster courtesy of Clawhammer Letterpress, 30 or more musicians have participated on the stage, and a couple of thousand folks of all ages, mostly inexperienced, have crowded our dance floors.

Local musicians in one of half a dozen mountain towns do the organizing for their dance, find the volunteers, promote, book and insure the event, organize the liquor license and bar, and decorate the hall. The Saturday night dances are often part of a weekend jam gathering. Musicians will travel hundreds of kilometers to participate and rehearsing, eating, hiking, mountain biking and just hanging out together go a long way to creating a one-night stand band. Everyone is welcome to play. The model has evolved to include a sitting, mic'd "Front Row", who receive gas money and perhaps an honorarium. The "Back Row" musicians are encouraged to dance if they don't know the tune in their sleep. The strength of the model has been to develop musicians who get to experience playing for dances before they might otherwise be invited on a stage.

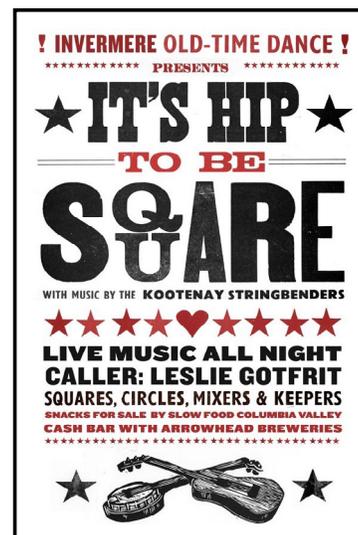
We break even, splitting the money from tickets and an occasional small grant (like the one we received from CDSS), amongst the musicians, the sound technician and equipment, ticketing and posters, and me, the caller. We are almost always at capacity and depending on the size of the hall, 75-150 people show up. We spend \$0 on advertising but take advantage of free listings, social media and the power of word of mouth. Local newspaper coverage, when we are lucky to get it, always brings in the curious.

Some dances are billed as family-friendly, but most are adult events. Teens are welcome but a majority of folks are 20 to 60 years old. Depending on the location, the average age is skewed higher or lower, but we always get a good range.

Creating community is a goal and we've noticed the level of socializing, skill levels, and noise going up in subsequent dances in a town. Saturday night is all about having a good time and we supply that. The fact that we almost always sell out tells me we are filling a need for connection, pleasure, laughter, and participatory experiences. The two words I hear all the time are fun and community. We present it as retro and hip, not Modern Western Square Dancing, and invite those with two left feet. We say we are not the crinoline crowd but dressing up in vintage dresses and cowboy boots is hinted at and has been embraced by quite a few people. We encourage dancing with lots of different people, do mixers all evening, and make sure there is a playful element, perhaps a little bit of chaos, in every dance. The pace is fast with one walk-through only. A quick elbow swing is all that is ever needed. Most dances are gender-free, but occasionally I will call a square using Ladies and Gents, emphasizing anyone can dance either role. I focus on satisfying dances that introduce people to a variety of formations and figures, have opportunity for interaction and problem solving as a group, and lead to laughter and fun.

The actual program is three 45-minute sets of traditional, mostly Appalachian, community dancing—longways, circle mixers, scatter sets, squares and a competitive game, with breaks to encourage socializing, and the beloved Waltz Mixer to end. Smaller bands often perform in the break between dance sets. A bluegrass foursome, a trad country trio, swing tunes, and old-time harmony singing have graced our stage. The Hip To Be Square dances have become a way for different combinations of musicians to try out their repertoire and add richness to our evenings. This model has worked really well for this itinerant dance series. Musicians will drive three hours for gas money because it is a guaranteed good time and a chance to develop skills

and relationships. The success of the early Hip To Be Square dances provided the mostly-amateur musicians the incentive to get together between gigs to practice tunes. One example is the town of Canmore, where dances sell out in a less than a day, and there's a weekly Sunday night jam. They also showed up in force for a workshop with visiting old-time musicians Greg and Jere Canote.



There are also challenges. One example: At most dances someone will inevitably request we bring Hip To Be Square to his or her private birthday or wedding party. As a caller I began employing smaller bands, under the "Kitchen Party" banner, for paid private events. This is what we hoped for. However, the increasing strength of musicianship in the Kootenay Stringbenders community has meant it is harder to find weekends where the core musicians don't have other gigs and there is an expectation to start paying musicians more than gas and a small stipend. Growth may put our brand out of business.

The success of Hip To Be Square empowered me to take the leap this past year and offer a new three-dance series called The Calgary Old-Time Experience. I'm collaborating with a musician, Greg Monforton, who shared my vision for a regular urban dance that replicated the joy we saw on the dance floors of those small towns. The model is different, and the risk higher, but the results have been the same. We are filling the hall with a mostly young crowd who are experiencing traditional dance and music for the very first time, as well as developing small bands that can play for dancing.

Far from the dance riches of the East or West Coasts, old-time dance and music are gaining a tiny toehold in little Canadian mountain communities and one big city. We'll keep at it, spreading the joy one dance at a time.

*Leslie Gotfrit is a dance caller in Calgary, Alberta, who uses Anglo-American traditional dance forms and live music to create joy, fun and community.*