

Musicians Column—Road Trip!

A Practical Guide for New Touring Bands

by David Firestine

You have a contra dance band that has been doing local/regional dances for a while, and you think you are ready to take the show on the road. Here's what you need: 1) connections with other dance communities, 2) a good band, and 3) a plan.

Connections with other dance communities

More than anything else, being hired as a band (or caller) requires relationships with other people in the dance communities where you want to play. Do you have friends in those communities? Do they know (and like) your band? Are they influential with the dance organizers? This is most often the key to getting hired. Look for opportunities to cultivate new relationships with callers, organizers and dancers.

A Good Band—Is your band really ready?

Has your band received positive feedback from other musicians, callers and dancers? Do you have good tunes, good tempos, a variety of tunes, a groove that dancers love? Do you have a stage plot for the sound tech? Do you know the personalities and habits of your band mates well enough to be optimistic about your compatibility on the road? Who needs coffee in the morning before they are happy? Most importantly, do you have a member that is happily willing to find dances, negotiate with organizers, and keep shifting logistical details organized?

A Plan

- Can you convince a remote dance organizer that you have a great band?

The person booking a new band will need evidence. Do you have a band website? Do you have a CD that you can send? Do you have good quality videos on Youtube? Can you provide references from dancers, callers, musicians from other bands, or dance organizers? Ask well-travelled (including local) callers who you have worked with successfully for a good reference. Can you describe your music well in one sentence? Can your band attract dancers? All of these things will help you get your foot in the door.

- Do you expect to make any money? What is your motivation?

I would guess that most new touring bands do not net much profit. I am happy when we break even on a tour, and really happy when we make tens of dollars. If you love to play, and love to play for dancers, love to travel, that may be enough motivation to do a dance tour. Are all of your band members motivated by the same things? If there are significant differences, be aware of them and try to resolve them.

• Book a Tour

1. Pick a time frame and location. It may be a particular dance that you have a desire to play, or just a beautiful place you would like to visit. Make sure that all band members are available for the time of the tour you are setting up!

2. Find a group of dances. This site will help you locate dances that you might travel to: <http://www.contradancelinks.com/>.

3. Start collecting data. In our band "STEAM!," Claire (thank you, Claire) builds a spreadsheet to organize information. It contains the dance locations, the day of the week of each dance, organizer contact phone numbers and email addresses. On the website referenced above, you will see the dates of dances, but it will help to know if the dances are the first Monday of the month, first and third Fridays, or every Saturday. Can you tell if there is a series of dances that might make a good tour from a travel standpoint?

4. Start small—a tour of three or four dances is enough to begin. In time, you will have more contacts and longer tours will be possible.

5. Call the organizer of what you think might be the anchor gig(s). It may be a big dance, or a prestigious one or just a dance you want on your resume. Convince this person to hire you with your fabulous negotiating skills, your references, your website, etc. The organizer may also give you insight into the other dances in the area.

6. Contact the other dance organizers, and if everything comes together well, you have a tour set up! There will be delays in hearing back from

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and culture. Our repertoire choices can facilitate respectful tributes to dear friends while highlighting often marginalized histories. Yet these same choices, if they allow for mimicry of affect, can easily turn well-intentioned efforts into caricatures that reaffirm marginalization. As we embrace more inclusive musical repertoires, let's pay careful attention to the choices we make, drawing on our shared embodied knowledge to sensitively remember and perpetuate songs and styles with which we are intimately familiar. Reflecting on the complicated racial politics that brought *The Colored Sacred Harp* to our attention, let's also consider the histories—personal and political—of our own corners of the vast landscape of traditional song and dance.

Multimedia Extras

- Black Sacred Harp singers from the Wiregrass region sing at a celebration of Dewey President Williams's 81st birthday, and Williams speaks about the tradition, in this 1979 film shot in Ozark, AL, and directed by Landon McCrary. YouTube video of a VHS tape dubbed from a 166 mm print. 17:22. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4aCHWxc3pT8>.
- H. Japheth Jackson, son of *Colored Sacred Harp* compiler Judge Jackson, leads a 1990s-era Dothan, Alabama, television program featuring singing from *The Sacred Harp*. Stanley Smith and Tommie Spurlock (third from right and fifth from left, back row, respectively), two longtime white supporters of black Sacred Harp singing in the Wiregrass region, join an aging group of area black singers. YouTube video. 29:33. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Cat1HyEeFM>.
- Stanley Smith speaks about *The Colored Sacred Harp* and leads a song from the book at a 2012 singing in Montgomery, Alabama. YouTube video. 3:29. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Y9Kc4Y3G5k>.

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organizers. Some dances book out a year or more, some only a month or two. Some dances happen all year long, some take the summer off. When one or more of the dances don't work, look for others in the area. Is there a Waltz Night, or (if your band knows how to play for one) an English country dance? There are a lot of possibilities, and you may need them to build a tour. When things change, make sure that all band members are still available for the evolving tour.

To all dance musicians: Thank the organizer in your band for setting it all up, and have a great trip!

Dave Firestine plays mandolin and other string instruments with STEAM! (below) and The Privy Tippers, and can be found at the epicenter of Carp Camp at the Walnut Valley Festival (CA).



Dance & Sing Your Brains Out This Summer

PINEWOODS, Plymouth, MA

- Family Week, July 16-23
- Harmony of Song & Dance, July 23-30 (with *Contra Dance Callers Course*)
- English Dance Week, July 30-Aug 6
- American Dance & Music, Aug 6-13
- Early Music Week, Aug 13-20 (with *English Dance Leaders Training in Music & Accademia*)
- Campers' Week, Aug 20-27

OGONTZ, Lyman, NH

- Family Week July 31-Aug 7 (with *American Dance Musicians Course & Teachers Training Course*)

TIMBER RIDGE, High View, WV

- Adult & Family Week, Aug 14-21 (with *American Dance Musicians Course & Square Dance Callers Course*)

and a BRAND NEW WEEK: CAVELL, LEXINGTON, MI
Dance, Music & Spice, Aug 14-21



www.cdss.org/camps, 413-203-5467 x 2