

Hiring Dance Camp Staff—Guidelines For Organizers

by Lisa Greenleaf

Introduction

These guidelines were written and augmented over the course of many dance camps and festivals, with the input of various bands and callers. When gigs are organized and the staff is treated well, we performers enjoy our jobs and are happy to go the extra mile if asked to do so. When gigs are challenging due to poor organization, we performers become edgy. When things are really bad, we act like professionals and do our job, but you can be sure we won't do that gig again and will tell our friends about it. In short, a well run weekend allows the performers to do their best, and this good energy spills over to the dancers, your target audience.

As an organizer myself, I appreciate that dance camp committees are made up of volunteers. As a performer, I love what I do, and having a satisfying camp experience makes up for the fact that I'm not being paid very much to do it. As a dancer, I know that when the performers are happy, they will provide a satisfying experience for all of us.

The two biggest factors in working with staff are forethought and communication. The clearer you are about your expectations, the better. Likewise, you must ask the performers to express their preferences, concerns and conditions. I offer you some key points to consider.

Deciding On Staff

Before deciding on staff, you, the organizer, will want to establish your budget, based on projected income and expenses. Hiring staff from out of town means you need to know how much you can spend on travel. I don't know of any band/callers who will go too far out of their local area if travel expenses are not covered; certainly staff who must fly expect to have their airfare and airport parking reimbursed, as well as any extra travel expenses needed to get to the site. You are not responsible for travel and lodging needs beyond the dates of your weekend, unless you ask staff to arrive early.

Sometimes you can work out an airshare arrangement with another weekend in your general vicinity. For example, Oregon dance groups will often share transcontinental airfare with Seattle groups. If both groups have no trouble filling their weekends, sharing staff is not a problem.

The next step is to factor in performer fees. I hesitate to say how much each staff person's fee should be as there are many variables, and the fees will increase over time (I hope). Most groups pay a prearranged fee; a few groups offer a flat fee plus a bonus after expenses are met. Please also factor in meal expenses if your event is not providing meals.

After deciding on who your headliners will be, you can be creative in filling out the rest of the staff. Local talent may be willing to come as scholarship recipients to do one or two workshops, for example.

Canadian groups should be prepared to pay US performers in US dollars unless other arrangements are discussed ahead of time.

You will also need to decide if staff guests are allowed. You're not expected to pay for their travel, but most groups offer a discount or waive the attendance fee for staff guests.

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How to choose bands and callers

The organizers of other weekends can provide you with good information about popular performers. You can find out about other dance camps from various websites: CDSS, NEFFA, The Dance Gypsy and Ted Crane's site, to name a few. Your local dancers may also be able to give you suggestions based on their travels. Ask your current weekend staff if they can recommend other performers who would be suitable.

Before you talk with bands, do your research. Find out who is in the band (many bands have websites or you can use Ted Crane's site), what instruments they play and what styles they play. Some large bands can be reduced and some small two person bands can be augmented, but you must confer with the existing band first; please don't make this arrangement yourself.

I personally appreciate organizers who ask me which bands I like to work with, and bands themselves may have preferences in callers. Sometimes a caller's repertoire demands a particular kind of music, so it pays to ask. This method of hiring does take more time, but it can result in an exciting staff. I do know a few bands/callers who have turned down gigs because they weren't comfortable being paired with particular performers, but I think this happens rarely.

In any case, please don't ask performers if they're interested unless you plan to hire them. There are still a few groups who send out noncommittal feelers (are you interested, are you available, how much do you charge, we'll let you know if we want you). This approach is easier for your committee, but it's annoying to these performers and may mean you lose your first choice to another group who makes a firm offer.

Making an offer

Give yourself plenty of time to hire your staff. With so many new dance camps out there, it's best to start hiring ten months to a year in advance, and more if you have your heart set on particular performers. In contacting performers, give very clear information, especially if you have to leave a phone or email message: the dates of the weekend, location, the sponsoring organization, name, phone number and email of the contact, housing (at a camp or in people's homes), meal arrangements. Give a need-to-know-by date so performers can arrange their schedules, if need be. It's also nice to let performers know if there are any area dances at which they could play before or after your event.

Workshops

Once your staff has been hired, ask them for workshop ideas and if possible, be specific about what you want. If you have done your research, you will know which bands like to play for English or swing or a waltz session (i.e., don't hire them before knowing they can play the styles you want). Some sponsoring groups view their events as a good opportunity to work on dance style; I've taught at many weekends at which all of my workshops were geared towards raising the level of dancing in the community. The organizers have even given me specific moves to cover. Similarly, musicians have been asked to come and address specific points about playing for dances. Other weekends have asked for just one workshop on style and have then chosen interesting dance themes from a list I've supplied. Still other events are centered around just having a fun time. Ask callers for a minimum of four workshop ideas from which the committee can choose, and ask musicians if they have specific workshops they would like to lead.

If you want a caller's workshop, put some thought into what your goals are. A beginner's workshop means the basics will be covered from scratch in a hands-on fashion. Most likely the leader will want a melody instrument and a mic. Make sure your leader knows how to set up such a session; she/he will need to bring calling materials accessible to the beginner. If you are really trying to cultivate new callers I'd suggest two workshops: beginners on Saturday and beginners and

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intermediates on Sunday. For intermediates, you can have discussion sessions centered on specific themes (working with musicians, programming, teaching beginners, etc.) or you can have a roundtable for anyone to attend and discuss whatever issues are brought forth by the attendees.

Staff musicians may enjoy leading workshops for individuals or ensembles. They also like to give concerts, but you must ask them about this well in advance as concert and dance material can be quite different. Concerts are often scheduled before the evening dance or on Sunday after brunch.

Organizing the schedule

First you need to decide how the evening dances will work, especially if you have multiple bands/callers. Sometimes the local band/caller will take Friday night, which can be a safe bet if the out of town staff is traveling on Friday afternoon. If you would like two bands/callers to split each evening, it's nice if Saturday night is a four hour dance so that each group has a chance to build a program. Truthfully, the dancers may not notice this as much as the bands/callers will, so it's your choice. Some groups have scheduled an even split on Friday night and a lopsided split on Saturday, favoring the out of towners. Other groups have had even splits on both nights and have let the callers decide when they'll call. Most of the time I assume I'll be working with only one band in the evening (the one with which I was hired), but clearly anything is possible. Please communicate your intentions and expectations ahead of time.

The final Sunday afternoon dance can be scheduled with one or two separate bands and end up as a hodgepodge of all the staff musicians, but it's best to let the musicians work this out for themselves as it depends on common repertoire and tastes.

Once your evening dances are set you can organize the daily workshops. If the band/caller played late in the night, it's nice not to have them on first thing in the morning unless the dance ended at 11 pm and the first workshop isn't until 9:30 am. Dance style workshops and less familiar genres are best held in the morning when dancers are most attentive, and the same is true for intricate couple or step dance classes. After lunch there is usually a lull (I call it the carbo crash). This is a good time for non-dance workshops (callers, musicians, singers). Late afternoon is suitable for special interest dancing such as non-fussy couples dances, advanced contras or intermediate/advanced swing, English or Scandinavian. In general, staff members expect no more than three workshops unless it's been cleared in advance. Staff who are on first Saturday night will want some rest in the late afternoon, especially if you expect them to be at dinner with you.

The campers, too, will want some down time. At a nonresidential camp people will need time to drive back and forth to events. If you are having a fancy dress or theme dance on Saturday night, please allow time independent of dinner for people to get ready. The musicians may also need set up time before the evening dance (see Sound).

Dancers can go on all night, and some weekends have had local musicians play contra or swing music until the wee hours. Please don't ask your main staff to do this unless you have cleared it with them in advance and promise to make their schedules very light the previous afternoon and the following morning!

Many weekends now begin Sunday with open waltzing/couple dancing, before, during or after brunch. This is a lovely idea as long as the musicians didn't have to stay up too late the night before. Sometimes a local musician is offered a scholarship to play these sessions.

Once again, consult with your staff about the schedule before they arrive at camp. Allow plenty of time for an email back and forth; some schedules go through five or more drafts before all parties are satisfied. This process isn't a pain; it's an opportunity to get the best out of your staff.

Precamp Logistics

Send out a contract outlining dates, payment, housing, travel reimbursement, available

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sound equipment, instrument plans for bass and piano players (if the band needs a piano or bass, be specific about what you can offer—you may end up having to borrow or rent these instruments, so talking with the musicians about their needs is important), meals and number of workshops and evening dances. Contracts are especially useful reminders for the staff, as they may not organize themselves for your weekend until it's time to go. Please include all the information that you send to the campers. I've arrived at many a camp surprised to find out that a certain costume was expected for the Saturday night dance.

In making travel arrangements, think about distance. If your camp is held in winter and your staff is coming from snowy climates, you might want them to come in Thursday night just in case. However, be aware that some performers have real jobs which might preclude this option; be flexible. Be clear about who is to purchase airline tickets. Some groups work with a travel agent or a specific committee member to get the best deals. In this case, please consult with the staff member before finalizing the itinerary. Staff can also make their own plans, with appropriate prods and budget guidelines from the committee, especially when there's a sale on fares. I prefer this method because I have several airports I can utilize, but scheduling depends on rush hour and other factors. Just be clear about your expectations about budget and arrival and departure times, factoring in the drive to the airport. We need to know the latest flight we can take for arrival and the earliest flight we can take back for departure. If staff members are driving, provide them with accurate directions, driving times and expected arrival times.

Make sure all of your staff members have contact phone numbers and addresses. For those performers who are flying, please assign someone to pick them up or arrange to provide a car (be very clear about how the car is to be accessed). Do not ask performers to take tricky or cumbersome public transportation unless you can assign people to greet them and help them with luggage. Note that you will need one helper person per performer. It is essential that you give performers the name and phone/cell phone number of the person picking them up. Likewise, the greeter should have the performer's cell phone number. The greeter should make a large visible sign with at least the words "dance camp." You may feel shy about signs, but they are really the best beacons for weary travelers.

Your greeter should be able to provide musicians with enough trunk/van space for many bulky instruments and boxes. The same is true for the return trip to the airport as well as to lodging at nonresidential weekends.

Nonresidential Events (off site housing)

Please—the staff want real beds to sleep in! You're paying them to work hard and they need a good night's rest. Some staff like a party house and others like quiet; they will be clear about their needs if you ask. It's always nice when you ask performers about roommate preferences beforehand. They also expect that linens and towels will be provided and that simple breakfast and snack food will be available, even if there will be such food at the event site. If the hosts have animals, it's a good idea to make sure the staff don't have allergies, and please don't house staff in homes undergoing renovation. It's also wise to ask about food restrictions, both of hosts and performers. Please have a conversation with the hosts and the performers about all of the above issues before you go to the work of assigning housing; this will make it easier on everyone.

Hosts should not have to bring the staff to the hall earlier than the staff needs to be there. Many organizers like to house the staff, but this isn't fair to the staff if the host has late night or early morning duties and can't arrange a separate ride for the staff. Likewise, if the host leaves the site for an extended period of time, he should be clear about any necessary driving arrangements. And if at all possible, don't house the staff long distances from the event site.

It is expected that all meals will be provided. When this is not the case, make sure the staff knows this in advance. The best camps have performer liaisons who check in with the staff before every meal to make sure that everyone has a place to go, has transportation and knows how to get

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there. If camp doesn't start with a meal, the staff will want a chance to eat before the first evening dance, allowing enough time for a sound check.

Make sure that you will be able to lock up the dance hall/instruments/sound system if everyone is leaving the site for meals. Some groups pay people to guard the stage area during these times.

Residential Camps (on site housing)

The staff appreciate a quiet place with good beds. Again, please provide linens and towels if possible to lighten the load of overburdened musicians. In general, it's best to give staff their own quiet space and let them find the parties on their own. Easy access to showers as well as the main venues is also helpful. Ask about housing and roommate preferences before making assignments, and determine if there are any special dietary needs.

Who's In Charge

Once on site, it's effective to have an official liaison between the staff and the organizers. This person can answer questions about the schedule (especially if workshops are starting late or running over), organize off site meals and transportation, insure late night transportation if the hosts have left the site, and handle any other problems that may arise.

Sound

Please provide information about your sound equipment in your contract. These days mic'ing and monitoring a band can be a complex feat, so making arrangements ahead of time will curb frustrations later.

As far as running the sound, the best set up includes a full time sound person who stays at the board and adjusts levels as needed throughout the evening dance (for workshops, the sound can be set up and then left). Please choose someone who is comfortable receiving suggestions from the band and caller.

On Friday night, allow thirty to forty-five minutes per band for the sound check. You may need the same amount on Saturday depending on the bands; talk with them during the day if you're unsure.

Incidentals

Many musicians bring CDs and books to sell. Inform your staff if you have a set up for this.

Pay the staff early on Sunday so you and they won't be rushed at the end of the weekend.

Many groups offer free T-shirts to the staff, but this depends on your budget.

Another nice touch is to make sure the caller/band have plenty of water during the evening dance. Some groups have stocked coolers tucked away on stage for this purpose.

Please put a garbage can near the stage for the performers to use.

Some staff may want to stay and visit your area. You're not responsible for them at this point, but any help you can offer is appreciated.

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