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An Inside View of Contra Dancing in Brooklyn, 2015

Swing Your Partner and Do-Si-Do

BY JODY KRUSKAL

Nightlife options have expanded in Park Slope, as Brooklyn Contra doubles its dance series nights this spring, now offering two evenings every month where you can “swing your partner” and “do-si-do” to the latest live acoustic bands. There is no beer, wine, or intriguing blue cocktails, and yet, young folks are seeking out Brooklyn Contra for a good time, dancing together in a modest church gym called Camp Friendship. Unlike the noisy bars and clubs of the Big Apple, conversation at this dance is actually possible without shouting.

It’s been said that contra dancing is the most fun you can have with your clothes on.

Brooklyn Contra is the latest addition to a contra dance subculture that for over half a century has been hidden in plain sight among the glittering distractions of New York City. The latest contra dance growth spurt started some 15 years ago at the Manhattan contra dance series, when an influx of younger dancers arrived on the scene and kept coming back every week for more. Many of these dancers lived in Brooklyn, and now some of them have started a new dance series of their own called Brooklyn Contra. This new dance series is a welcome success story, drawing dancers of all ages from across the area to Brooklyn, for exceptional contra dancing pleasure.



Contrashock Dance presented by Brooklyn Contra and CDNY, Camp Friendship Hall, Brooklyn, Friday, September 18–20, 2015. Photo by Sam Segal. *All other photos here by Sam Segal are from the same event.*



Pass through. Brooklyn Social: Contra Dance, Camp Friendship Hall, July 18, 2015, presented by Brooklyn Contra with the Brooklyn Arts Council. Photo by Chloe Accardi. All other photos here by Chloe Accardi are from the same event.

Early History

Today's contra dancing has its roots in the social dances of Europe. English country dances became popular at the court of Queen Elizabeth in the 16th

century. Royals and peasants alike enjoyed these simple repeating dance patterns. Men and women could meet, greet, and retreat from each other, while enjoying a fun, playful, and flirtatious evening's

entertainment. In 1651, John Playford published his first collection of English country dances and tunes. Dancing masters were employed to teach the latest dances to high society. The English dances crossed over to France, where this popular form of dancing in a long set of partners first became known as *contredanse*.

Contra Dance in the US

French and English colonials brought their dances to the New World, where set dancing of all sorts became a popular pastime. It's well documented that Thomas Jefferson and George Washington liked nothing better than to dance with the ladies: quadrilles, which became modern square dancing, as well as longways-set dances, such as the famous Virginia Reel, an early contra dance.

In post-colonial America, it was the rural farmers and townfolk of New England who kept the old set dances alive, hosting "junkets" in their kitchens and barns. As urban centers turned to polka, ragtime, the Charleston, Swing, and other newer dancing pleasures, isolated areas in New England still danced the old set, including contras, squares, and circle



Swing your partner. Photo by Chloe Accardi.

dances. In the latter half of the 1800s, the national Grange farmers' movement built scores of large halls in small towns and rural communities across the land. While these were built primarily as venues for the movement's meetings, Grange halls in New England became known for their regular dances. As farming declined, many of the Grange halls fell into disrepair, and some were even purchased by the contra dancers who cherished them.

Just as the old dances seemed destined to die out and be forgotten, the early 20th century brought a revived interest in the folk arts generally. The Country Dance and Song Society (CDSS) was founded in 1915, as a national advocate for English and American traditional dancing in the United States. Brooklyn Contra, like most contra dance organizations in the US today, enjoys the benefits of membership, as an affiliate of CDSS.

Due to the efforts of a handful of dedicated Eastern enthusiasts, contra



Two dancers. Photo by Chloe Accardi.



Long lines go forward and back. Photo by Chloe Accardi.



Strumbow Squeezebow, consisting of Ross Harriss on guitar (*strum*), Bill Christophersen on fiddle (*bow*), Jody Kruskal on Anglo concertina (*squeeze*), and Trip Henderson on harmonica (*blow*). From left to right, Bill, Trip, Jody, Ross, and Marco Brehm on bass. Photo courtesy of the author.

dancing evolved in the 1960s and '70s and shed its identity as a mostly forgotten, indigenous folk dance of New England, growing to become a popular sensation. By the mid-1990s, contra dancing had expanded to include hundreds of regular dances in cities and towns across North America, all run by volunteers who wanted a local dance of their own, because contra dancing is so much more than just plain fun—it's a vibrant, community-building activity. Today, American contra dancing has spread across the globe, with active regular dances in at least 15 countries outside the US.

Contra Dancing Today

Contra dancers are not re-enactors—they don't wear frock coats and gowns. Comfortable clothes for a vigorous activity

are the norm. The men often wear shorts or jeans and tee-shirts, while the women mostly wear comfortable dresses, or tops and skirts. Some men these days even prefer to dance while wearing swirling skirts or kilts.

Likewise, dance callers and musicians are not simply recycling old dances and tunes; new material is being written and performed all the time. Modern sound systems amplify live musicians who play acoustic instruments: fiddle and piano, guitar, mandolin, upright bass, and sometimes winds, accordion, and concertina. It's a low-tech-high-tech combination. Contra music today might even include scatting vocals and beat boxing, drum sets, synthesizers, and looping techno electronics. These musical innovations are welcomed by some

dancers, but frowned upon by contra dance traditionalists, who consider them to be merely gimmicks.

Contra dancers at Brooklyn Contra have no interest in the wide variety of dances that were being enjoyed in the old Grange halls of New England. Gone are the quadrilles, singing squares, circle mixers, variety dances, hambos, and polkas. Of that bunch, only the waltz remains. There is always one at the end of the first half and another final waltz to finish the dance. Some dance communities feel strongly about keeping the old mix of dance styles, but here in New York City, it's 100 percent contra, or dancers grumble.

Contra Dance Basics

Three elements make up every contra dance; the caller, the musicians, and the

dancers. The basic structure is the longways set for “as many as will.” Dancers take their places standing across from their partners in a long double line that starts at the top of the set near the band and runs down the hall to the bottom of the set. This line could be formed of as few as eight dancers or as many as the hall can hold. Commonly, there are one, two, or three sets, but there could be many more if the dance is well attended and the hall is large. Dance caller Will Mentor claims he once called to approximately 1,000 dancers in the big hall at the Dance Flurry in Saratoga Springs, NY. Another giant dance happens yearly near Boston, at the New England Folk Festival Association, or NEFFA—one of the folk world’s crossroads.

In contra dancing, everyone is welcome. There are no fancy steps to learn, and it’s been said that, “if you can walk, you can contra.” Dancers can come alone or bring their friends; everyone will end up dancing with many partners in an evening.

The dance caller traditionally ends each dance with the instructions to “Thank your partner and find another.” Beginners are advised to arrive a half-hour early to their first dance, because there is usually a beginners’ walk-through taught by the caller. That’s when they learn the basic calls, patterns, and moves: *balance and swing, do-si-do, ladies chain, right hand star*, and a few others. Does this sound like square dancing? Well, it is—but in long lines.

Beginning Dancers

Aside from these brief teaching sessions before each dance, there are no classes: dancers learn as they go. Dance callers are mindful of the beginners and pick easy dances to start with. Then they progress to more challenging dances over the course of an evening.

After the dancers have lined up with their partners, the caller teaches a dance, walking the dancers through each part. The music begins with “four potatoes”



Swing. Photo by Chloe Accardi.

to set the tempo, “um-pa, um-pa, um-pa, um-pa,” and off we go. The caller continues to call the moves, reminding everyone of what they are about to do. As the dance repeats, the caller gradually



Down the hall. Photo by Chloe Accardi.



Caller Dan Black raises his foot, to signal to the band, Hog Wild, to finish up and end the last tune of the dance. Photo by Doug Healy.

cuts back on prompting. The dancers master the repeating sequence, and soon everyone is dancing to the music with only an occasional prompt from the caller. Experienced fellow dancers are generally helpful to struggling newcomers. Beginners may find it challenging—but it's a very friendly environment for learning. After a few dances, beginners have learned all the basics and can improve their dance skills by gaining the finer points through observation and experience.

Getting Sexy

At a good dance, folks are smiling and playing around, skirts are flying, everyone's twirling, the dancers are sweaty, and the band is hot. Clearly, contra dancing goes beyond aerobic exercise and wholesome community fun. It's certainly wholesome, but it's also sexy.



Ladies chain. Photo by Chloe Accardi.

Dancers look into each other's eyes and feel the other's weight and momentum as they hold on, swinging and spinning in a circle of two with a close embrace. With no words needed, old friends or strangers have a brief but intimate meeting, then they part ways and are on to the next. Good dancers are giving their full attention to each new partner. Dancing up and down the contra set has been called "serial monogamy" by veteran dancer Kathy Hieatt. At its core, contra dancing provides a safe and public courting activity, and it's not uncommon to hear, "I met my husband [wife, partner, lover] at the local contra dance."

Contra Dance Music

Brooklyn Contra has become a destination in the dance world. Out-of-town bands and callers pass through regularly on tour, and there are also well over a dozen local bands to choose from. The bands play mostly traditional reels and jigs. Improvisation is common and keeps



Everybody swing. Photo by Chloe Accardi.

things fresh through many repetitions of a tune. As long as the needs of the dancers are met, the beat is steady, and the

phrases are well defined, almost anything can be done to twist the tunes around. All tunes have 32 measures and adhere to the same AABB structure as the dances. A brisk pace is best, but not so fast that the dancers have to struggle to get where they need to be on time.

Dedicated "dance gypsies" will travel widely to dance to their favorite bands. The music is the glue that holds the whole endeavor together. The rhythmic, driving, lilting tunes propel the dancers into each other's arms, defining the exact moment for the next move and compelling them to dance in perfect time. At its best, the music can unify and electrify the room, inspiring dancers to hoot and stamp with delight.

Most bands pick their tunes on the spot with the advice of the caller. Typically, the caller will have a program of dances in mind but will make changes on the spur of the moment, to better suit a particular crowd, or perhaps just on a whim. Bands rarely know ahead of time which dances will be called and have only a minute or two, while the caller is teaching, to pick the next tunes. Callers might ask the musicians for a variety of qualities for the



Swing. Photo by Sam Segal.



Swing. Photo by Sam Segal.

next dance, such as fast or slow, bouncy or smooth, rags, slinky tunes, or tunes that have a marching feel. A caller might point out that the dance has “balances” at the top of the A section or “petronella turns” in the B section or “heys” or a “down the hall.” It’s widely accepted that any tune will work for any dance, but some tunes match a dance much better than others, and the art of a dance musician is partly defined by making excellent tune choices under pressure. Quite often, two or three tunes will be played as a medley for a single dance. Expert bands might try to

compose medleys from tunes that all match the rhythmic phrases and qualities of the music to the phrases and qualities of the dance. For obvious reasons, the best contra dance musicians are often players who enjoy dancing too.

As for the tunes themselves, there is a distinct body of fiddle music thought of as “New England tunes,” traditionally played for contra dancing. Most contemporary contra dance bands do not restrict themselves to these old “chestnuts,” but feel free to select from a wide-ranging repertoire of ancient melodies.

Traditional tunes from England, Ireland, Scotland, the Shetlands, Canada, and the American North and South are all fair game at a modern dance, as well as newly composed tunes that might sweep across the contra dance world every season or two, sometimes written by the very people who are playing them.

Some popular bands will happily quote commercial pop songs or jam with tuneless riffs all night long. Most dancers agree that if a band can pull it off, well then it works, regardless. Still, there are also many traditionalists who resist innovation and crave “well-phrased” tunes with distinctive melodies that help the dancers to know where they are and what to do. Constant conversation among the experienced dancers, musicians, callers, leaders, and organizers results in very real decisions about who will be hired to play the next dance. Callers and bands are often booked as far off as a year ahead of time.

The Economics of Contra Dancing

Dancers pay about the price of a movie ticket to attend. Musicians and callers are usually paid something, but only a few attempt to make a living wage at it. Anyone who tries to do this full time is going to find it hard to pay the bills by traveling around the country playing contra dances. Still, there are many talented folks who help supplement their incomes with the work of making dances happen.

The dance community could not exist without the thousands of volunteers who freely give their time and expertise to promote contra dancing on local, regional, and national levels. CDSS is the administrative leader, as the national organization that promotes contra dancing, as well as many other traditional folk arts. CDSS has only a handful of paid employees to do this work but manages a small army of dedicated volunteers, scholarship workers, and interns.

Local dances like Brooklyn Contra are all attempting to balance their books, pay their expenses, and grow their audience.



Gypsy. Photo by Sam Segal.



Twirling. Photo by Sam Segal.

Many small dances across the US have been unsuccessful in connecting with younger dancers and are struggling with an aging population that grows smaller every year. This is a recurring topic of conversation among dance leaders, and movers and shakers. Brooklyn Contra is one of the success stories that gives hope to those who fear the demise of contra dancing in the 21st century.

Brooklyn Dancing and Beyond

Brooklyn Contra began holding dances in 2011; today 75 to 150 folks attend twice a month. Located in Park Slope, it is the newest regular contra dance series in New York City and attracts a somewhat hipper and younger crowd than the excellent

weekly dance in Manhattan, which has been held in the same West Village location for more than 60 years and is run by Country Dance New York. Another regular dance series in New York City is Village Contra, catering to the GLBT dancing scene and their friends; you'll see lots of men in kilts and flowing skirts at that one. Another popular Brooklyn dance—which presents the older format of combining contra dances with squares, mixers, circle, and novelty dances—is run by Dave Harvey. He calls it the NYC Barn Dance.

It's a treat to see contra and community dancing grow and evolve over the years. There is room at the table for everyone in this big city of New York. Perhaps Staten Island Contra will be next—I certainly hope so.

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Jody Kruskal has been playing Anglo concertina at local contra dances in New York City since 1983. He plays at dances, camps, and festivals across the US, and travels yearly to England to sing vintage American songs in folk clubs. He is a family dance and wedding caller and has worked extensively in elementary schools as a teaching artist. You can dance to Jody's original tunes with his band Squeezeology. His other New York City contra dance bands include Grand Picnic, Dance Therapy, Strumbow Squeezeblow, the Backyard Boys, Hog Wild, Jaybird, Dressed Ship, Free the Reeds, Ten-Gallon Cat, and the Thistle Biscuits—to name a few. Photo of the author by Jeff Bary.

Useful Web Links

Brooklyn Contra: www.brooklyncontra.org

Country Dance New York: cdny.org

Village Contra: www.villagecontra.org

Dave Harvey's NYC Barn Dance: www.nycbarndance.com

The Country Dance and Song Society: www.cdss.org

Jody Kruskal: www.jodykruskal.com

Hog Wild playing at a CDNY dance: www.youtube.com/watch?v=39GNvbJQh6E

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