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Contra dancers swing their way through life

BY RICHARD ADES

“Hands four from the top,” the caller commands. It’s the signal that the dance is about to begin.

Across the hall, couples face other couples, and all four join hands. The friendly gesture establishes a bond, but it’s only temporary. Within seconds, the couples will be going their separate ways, partnering with new couples, then moving on again and again.

Welcome to contra dancing, square dancing’s unfettered cousin. Here there are no unbroken bonds, even within couples. A man may swing his partner, but he could just as easily be directed to swing his neighbor’s partner.

All the while, he gazes into her eyes just as boldly as she gazes into his. It’s flirtatious—and necessary. Dancers who don’t look at each other quickly become dizzy.

The musicians fiddle and strum, squeeze and pound their instruments, churning out traditional music in phrases perfectly mated to the moves. That is, they’re perfectly mated unless the dancers fall behind, which is easy to do if the moves are complex, the hall is crowded and the tempo is fast. Dancers try to catch up each time a “balance and swing” is called—the balance’s *step-stomp-step-stomp* echoes across the hall, offering proof that the dancers, for the moment, are in sync.

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It’s the beginning of a local contra night, and the caller leads the inexperienced dancers through the basic moves.

After the lesson, she encourages them to hit the dance floor—but not with each other. Wait until the fourth or fifth dance, she tells them. It’s easier to catch on if you start out with someone who already knows the moves and can push you in the right direction.

The dancers form couples, then lines. The caller leads everyone through the first dance’s patterns once or twice, and the music begins.

“Allemande right!” “Circle to the left!” “Pass through!” The calls are repeated in a sequence that soon becomes familiar. The dancers grin at each other, grinning even more when they come across a friend.

“Gypsy!” At the beloved command, men and women circle each other, locking eyes in mock or serious flirtation while waiting for the inevitable next call: “Swing your partner!”

There are mistakes, by beginners and sometimes even by the veterans, but few mind. It’s all part of the fun.

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Contra dancing has spread around the world, but it remains the most popular in New England, its birthplace. There one can find a nearby dance on any given weekend and on many weekdays, said Lissa Schneckenburger, who will bring her trio to a Columbus contra dance this weekend.

“It has a really special element of history in New England,” the Vermont fiddler said. “There are some dance halls that I can travel to within 40 minutes ... where people have been dancing for hundreds of years. And there’s been a weekly or monthly ongoing dance for that long.

“That sense of history in combination with something so genuine and fun is really special.”

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It’s Sunday afternoon, on the third day of one of many annual contra weekends held around the country.

The dancers have been dancing, the musicians playing and the caller calling since Friday night, with time out for classes, eating and sleeping. By rights they should all be dragging, but the energy level is higher than ever.

There are few beginners, only dancers committed enough to be here, often after driving for hours. As a result, few are shy about trotting out their best moves.

A woman in a swirling skirt spins once, twice, three times, not because she’s directed to but simply because the spirit moves her.

A man and a woman exchange confused glances over a call no one seems to understand. But they soon realize it doesn’t matter as long as they swing at the right time, which they do with joyful abandon.

Out in the lobby, dancers take quick breaks to gulp down water or lemonade or to sample the multiple treats the host dance community has laid out on long tables. Then it’s back to the dancing, which will be over all too soon.

In the outside world, life is marred by news of war, greed, divorce but inside the hall, the dancers smile and flirt, swing and sweat. Life is only as complicated as the familiar but ever-changing patterns.

“Hands four from the top,” the caller commands. The next dance is about to begin.