

# Contra Dancing 101

*by Bob Peterson*

## Come Dance!

First time dancers are especially welcome to join a dance, so come and dance!

Contra dancing is a fun way to socialize and get a bit of exercise. We encourage a friendly atmosphere, and seek to make everyone feel comfortable. We welcome the whole laundry list of lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, cross dressing, computer nebbishes, and all of our hetero friends.

What You're Getting Yourself In For

The simple answer is: lots of fun. At first you may feel worried about messing up. But, you know, that's all part of the experience too. You have fun anyway. And those who come again find themselves getting better in short order. There are no formal classes, it's that easy.

Briefly, in a contra dance you dance to movements called out by the Caller. The called movements are short, and the sequence is short enough to be repeated many times during a single dance. Unlike square dancing, the repetitions are fixed with no caller freestyling a dance. A dance lasts 10 to 15 minutes. And the time flies when you're having fun.

## Top Tips

- Enjoy the experience! For the self-critical, relax and enjoy yourselves. For the clumsy, have no fear because in contra dancing you just need to be able to walk. The fact is everyone has to be a beginner, and yes the experienced folks make mistakes too.
- Arrive early! We encourage you to come earlier than the scheduled start time. Certainly do not show up late to your first dance. Also the dances early in the program are simpler than the ones later in the program. The caller walks everyone through the dance without music, introducing new movements a dance at a time.
- Ask for help! We need our beginners, and we want you to feel good about dancing. Early arrivals should ask someone for a few pointers before the dance program begins. They can advise you on how to swing comfortably, and tell you what a "hey for four" is.
- Dress cool! This is exercise and the hall heats up. Light shirts are probably most important. Half the people dress in long pants, and the other half dress in shorts or skirts. In an LCFD dance not even the clothing plays a role! Take it easy, sit out some dances to cool off. Perhaps bring a change of clothing.
- Wear clean, comfortable shoes! A good pair of shoes is clean and does not scuff the floor to track in street dirt. The air gets dusty enough without help from the street. Also, comfortable shoes mean you can dance smoother and longer, with less chance of hurting yourself. Beginners might find an old pair of leather sole shoes to wear, or cleaned-up sneakers. Change into your "dance shoes" at the dance. (Once you decide to come again and again you can invest in quality shoes for \$70-\$80.)
- Bring a friend! We're a chatty enough group during the breaks, but if you're shy a friend helps. We do discourage two beginners from dancing as a couple. You'll enjoy the dance more if you have an experienced person to guide you.

## In Detail

OK. You want to know more. This is loads more than you need to know because when you're dancing it all just "happens".

A contra dance is much like a simple square dance, with a caller who tells everyone what movement to do next. But in contra dancing the people line up like this:

The lines can be as long as the hall allows. The lines have a Top and Bottom. At the top of the line is the Caller and the Band (or in rare cases, the recorded music).

Each person's partner stands opposite them in the facing line. Couples dance in a set of four people. The top couple is called Couple One, the bottom couple Couple Two.

Each of these two couples dances in a "mini dance" with each other. In the simplest dances these four only dance with each other. At the end of the "mini dance" couples One and Two will have traded places. Each couple turns the face their new neighbor couples to form a new group of four.

Thus the Ones progress down to the bottom of the line, and the Twos progress up to the top. Hence the name "contra" dance.

Notice the two couples at the top and bottom. They got there because they swapped places in their last set of four, but when they turned around there was no other couple there to dance with them. These couples are "out at the ends" and are about to change direction of progression. They wait out during a "mini dance" when they find no other couple to dance with.

The whole dance keeps repeating these "mini dances" until everyone has had fun. Or about 10-15 minutes. But if that ain't enough fun, there's the next dance. So walk up to someone and ask them to dance.

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