

Talk of the Town: Contra Dancing

Kelley Martin

At 8:00 on a Saturday night, Saint Mark's on the Hill, a church on Reisterstown Road, is flooded with feet. Sponsored by the Baltimore Folk Music Society (BFMS), contra dancers line up in rows of eight with anxious feet, scuffing the already well worn hard wood floors. They are waiting for the first strains of music that keep the feet moving. Pillows of Society, a three-piece ensemble of guitar, fiddle, and banjo, plays a jig while Diane, who runs the dances, passes through the crowd, helping to arrange the lost and stray feet on the dance floor. It's apparent that no natural inclination for dance matters here, and in fact, the only criterion for joining in the dance," one man says, "is to be able to stand."

Contra dance has been around since the early 1700s and rather than diminishing in popularity, it has grown, with part of the appeal being that it is family-oriented—no one is left out. Essentially it is couple dancing where a caller is a main part of the event. The caller's duty is lead the couples through the dancers through the movements. Diane, the caller for the evening dance, has been doing it for thirteen years. Her rapport with the dancers is animated, stemming, she says, from her teaching ability at a local high school.

From age eight to 80, the dancers wear everything from polka-dotted socks and tennis shoes to patterned knee-highs and dance shoes. They line up in eight rows on the well-worn hardwood floors as Susan calls "Raise hands for a partner." People pair up without regard for age, sex, or gender: Men dance with men, women with women, grandmothers with grandsons. "The floor is so crowded that any bystanders are soon pushed to the perimeter. A good thing, since getting in the way of dancing feet at a Saturday night contra dance can be dangerous thing. Still, Bob, president of the all-volunteer organization, is not comfortable with anyone standing. If he had his way, everyone would be moving even though floor space has reached its limit. "It's easier to dance," he says.

"We start them as young as toddlers," she says. "They grow up with happy feet." The children's feet catch on more quickly than the adult's. The band plays Fisher's Hornpipe dozens of times until Diane helps choreograph the dancers well enough to stop tripping over one another. She then herds them into groups of four, while Susan, the caller says "Fall in. Don't fall down, just fall in." The crowd laughs.

Susan says, "I took a class in 1995 because my friend was teaching it and needed bodies to fill it. Once I started, I could not stop. I kept calling dances and people kept showing up. I cannot imagine having a better time watching everyone around me have fun." A high school teacher, Susan knows how to work the crowd. Each is different, has different levels, and knows different dances. When she calls, the dancers respond. Two teenage exchange students from France do not speak English well but know the language of dance. When asked if they are having fun, they shake their heads in affirmation as if responding to one of Susan's calls.

Among the many trained feet, just as many novices get turned around in the more complicated dances. Susan calls, "Gypsy, now dosado;" couples gaze at each other with an intensity that is almost alarming, but is all in good fun. This is part of the gypsy move: couples do not touch but instead go around one another, staring each other down. Many have a hard time keeping a straight face. Susan calls, "Rabbit chase the squirrel. Catch that partner." One partner chases behind another until they are back in their original locations and the dance continues. Partners swap and intertwine. Contra dancing is not for people who fear human contact, and perhaps contact is the point. No cell phones or iPods can be seen.

Several women wear contra skirts that flare; they grasp theirs with one hand while waving the other. "The skirt has to be picked very carefully because of its *swirlability* factor," a woman explains, turning to demonstrate her planet-patterned skirt. Men wear everything from shorts to kilts to jeans, from tie-dyed t-shirts to sweater vests. One man has on a yellow t-shirt with a chartreuse tie in a Windsor knot. A very round man sports a green t-shirt that says "Butterball" on

the pocket. A man in a black kilt, bright red shirt and headband says, "If they ask what's under my kilt, tell them I said 'no comment'."

Partner set dancing is complicated. It looks like a Rubic's Cube of bodies weaving into and out of one another. A woman remarks, "That is a northern move because of the way they hold their hands," nodding toward a group of four moving in a circle. "They hold their hands up rather than down, like they do down South." Like calls, hand holds and certain dances are regional.

Susan starts another dance, asking for partners. After a few moments when single dancers pair up, she asks, "Does anyone need anything else?" Voices from the floor call out "A retirement plan." "A new pair of comfortable shoes." "A new partner." "Promenade," Susan calls, and the feet again begin to move.