

## WHAT IS A CONTRA DANCE?

At the end of the 17th century, English country dances were taken-up by French dancers — hybrid choreographies exist from this period using the steps from French court dance in English dances. The French called these dances contra-dance or contredanse. As time progressed, English country dances were spread and reinterpreted throughout the Western world, and eventually the French form of the name came to be associated with the American folk dances, especially in New England (this Frenchified name change may have followed a contemporary misbelief that the form was originally French). As of 2005, there is a regularly scheduled contra dance in most North American cities or regions, as well as in Belgium, Denmark, England, Czech Republic and Australia.

A typical evening of contra dance is three hours long, including an intermission. Many events offer beginner-level instructions for up to half an hour before the dance. A typical event consists of a number of individual contra dances, divided by a scattering of other partner dances, perhaps one or more waltzes, schottisches, polkas, or Swedish hambos. In some places, square dances are thrown into the mix. Music for the evening is invariably provided by a live band playing jigs and reels, from the British Isles, Canada, or the USA; often the tunes are traditional and more than a century old, and sometimes a few tunes have been composed by the musicians on stage.

Most contra dance events are open to all comers, regardless of experience. Generally, a leader, called a caller, will teach each individual dance in the period immediately before the music for that individual dance begins, a time called the "walk through." During each dance's walk through, the dancers learn the dance by walking through in order the moves that comprise an individual contra dance, following the caller's instructions.

The contra dance tradition in North America is to change partners for every dance, while in the United Kingdom typically people dance with the same partner the entire evening. One who attends an evening of contra dances in North America does not need to bring his or her own partner. In the short break between individual dances, the dancers invite each other to dance. The music begins and the dancers repeat that sequence some number of times before the dance ends. Then the dancers thank their partners, and find new partners for the next dance.

At most dances no special outfits are worn, but "peasant skirts" or other full, light weight skirts are popular, as these have a very pretty effect when swinging and are more comfortable to dance in than pants. This includes some men as well; contradancers can be quite liberal in the way they dress. Low, broken-in, soft-soled, non-marking shoes are recommended and, in some places, required. Perfumes, colognes, or other scented products are not commonly worn.

As in any social dance, cooperation is vital to contra dancing. Since over the course of any single dance, individuals interact with not just their partners but everyone else in the set, contra dancing might be considered a group activity. As will necessarily be the case when beginners are welcomed in by more practiced dancers, mistakes are made; mistakes will be overlooked, in most circles, as long as they do not upset the experience for the rest of the group -- as long as dancers are not thrown off from the music, and as long as no one is hurt.