

Dancing with Deep Roots

We're very fortunate in this community to have a number of outlets for dancing, particularly traditional* dancing. In reference to some of the traditional American dances, I've noticed serious confusion. Many traditional American dance styles have shared roots, which is why they seem so similar. However, the more familiar a dancer becomes, the more obvious the differences are.

First of all, a disclaimer: I am not an expert in traditional dance. It is only within the last year that I've begun my fascination with Southern Square Dances. There is no way to research this style of dance and not be made aware of the contention between Modern (Western/International) Square Dancers, Contra Dancers, New England Square Dancers, Southern Square Dancers, and a few other types of Square Dancers. One thing these all have in common is the presence of a "caller", the person who coordinates the dancers.

The above mentioned types of dance all have English and French roots, with other cultural roots mixed in. It was in the US that these dances first included a caller. Black slave musicians played for dances. They watched the dancers, who had been trained in dance and did not use a caller, run through various figures and moves. To begin a dance, typically one couple would begin dancing a figure and the other couples, familiar with the figure would follow suit. The slave musicians would share what they saw at the dances with their community. To facilitate a dance, one musician would have to "call" the moves to the dancers**. This style of conducting a dance turned out to be quite popular. Few of us present day dancers are formally "trained" in dance, we learn through going to dances and paying attention to the caller and other dancers.

The differences between these dances are far too many for me to note with much confidence. There are a number of folks, far more knowledgeable than I, who have written extensively on traditional dance. For our community, it seems that the dances worth noting are Modern/International Square Dancing, Contra Dancing, and Southern Square Dancing. Modern Square dancing has a big clue in its name. This style came about half way through the 20th century. It borrows from traditional dance, but is a completely different style. Contras and non-Modern Squares have figures that are typically taught before the music begins. The caller walks the dancers through the figure, the music starts and the dancing begins at the caller's cue.

Modern/International Square dancing has a number of moves (100 give or take) that the dancers know. The music starts and the caller call's moves in whatever order he desires- there are no scripted patterns or figures. You can imagine the potential for dismay when one of these experienced dancers show up at a traditional dance and has to wait to be walked through the figure. To further exacerbate what already has potential for distaste, some of the known moves in International Square Dancing share names with traditional moves, but the moves are not the same. There is a lot of information on Modern Square Dancing to be found online. I know that I am not doing this style of dance much detailed justice here, but that's my bias, I prefer traditional dance.

*By "traditional" I mean dances that have Western European roots, and have been danced in the US since the 1700's. My intention is to keep this a simple article. I do not wish to slight other cultural dance.

** I learned this summarized history of calling from a discussion with Phil Jamison, a North Carolina caller, at a Dare to be Square West workshop in Portland, OR. Please feel free to research Phil's credibility using your favorite search engine.

Contras and Southern Squares have a few mentionable differences. First, Contras are designed to keep everyone moving all the time. Southern Squares often have active and inactive couples. The active couple, or the visiting couple, visits each couple in the square and does a figure with them. At any point there could be two couples not doing a darn thing except (hopefully) watching so that they know what to do when it's their turn to dance. This inactivity lends itself to break figures, which are figures that incorporate the entire square. Break figures are generic; they aren't specific to the main dance figure. I could call two completely different dances and use the exact same break if I'm not feeling terribly creative. Contras don't seem to warrant break figures because everyone is dancing anyway.

There are certainly other differences between Contras and traditional squares. It's my belief that the main difference between dancing Contras and Southern Squares is the presence of active and inactive couples. If a dancer is used to Contras, they may at first be mildly bored with Squares. I guarantee that there are plenty of simple squares requiring little previous knowledge of dancing, but that is exactly the point. It's important to start with simple dances that teach basic moves in order to include new dancers. I prefer dancing and calling the more complicated figures, but sometimes those don't happen until half way through the dance. We could have dances for different levels of dancers, but that sort of exclusion at a traditional dance leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

One last similarity that I hope all of the mentioned dancing styles share is a community-building nature. At a community dance, you're likely to find dancers that span the age gap, from 4 years old to 80+. Dancers may have different views on politics, religion, healthcare, hygiene, family values, and diet styles but they all have one thing in common: they are all there to have fun, and possibly to meet some new people doing dances with deep roots.

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Here are a few of online sources for more information on Square and Contra dancing. But don't limit yourself, there's plenty more out there!

<http://musaique.com/contradance/articles/dare-to-be-square-still.html>

<http://squaredancemichigan.tripod.com/id28.html>

<http://bubbaguitar.com/square/orient.html>

<http://www.cdss.org/publications/wvasquares/index.html>

http://www.oldtimeherald.org/archive/back_issues/volume-7/7-8/dance_beat.html