

Contra: Square Dancing for Hippies

by Keegan Hempill

This article was adapted from an English composition essay submitted by college student Keegan Hempill. It has been edited for length.

I cup my face in my hands and let out a low groan as the caller announces the next dance. Thirty or so baby boomers stomp across the wood dance floor, some in hard-bottomed dance shoes, some in tennis shoes, some in sandals, some simply in socks — all trying to find a partner. I look up to see Mom with her hand outstretched in the universal nonverbal invitation to dance. “Come on,” she says. “You have to dance at least half.” I let out an overly-long sigh. Though I’d managed to avoid contra dancing for the better part of a decade, this college writing assignment has whisked me back into the petronella twirls of my childhood.

I reluctantly take Mom’s hand. I haven’t danced with my mother since I was 10 and the idea makes me a little embarrassed, but I gather my resolve. I’m here for research; to reacquaint myself with contra dancing so I can write a decent paper.

We walk out onto the dance floor and join the two long lines of dancers facing each other up and down the hall. The caller walks us through the first dance. It’s Jacob’s Potato, one of the simplest contra dances, perfect for beginners and dropouts like me. The band plays the four potatoes intro, then begins the 64-counts of the old-timey tune “Turkey in the Straw.” We do-si-do and allamande, sashay and peel the banana. I try to hold my solemn demeanor through the dance, but by the time it’s my turn to sashay down the line I can’t help but break into a smile.

As far as unique form, it’s hard to differentiate from square dancing and other types of folk dancing, as it borrows heavily from them. It’s the community aspect that really sets contra apart from more synchronized dances, however. Contra dancers are a nation-wide federation of incredibly happy people that come together to swing each other around and stomp on a wood floor with childlike joy. The best way I can describe it is: imagine the most upbeat, non-judgmental church congregation you’ve ever seen, then take out the religion and add dancing.

Mom painted a tee-shirt that says, “CONTRA DANCING

— BETTER THAN PROZAC!” She’s been proclaiming it for years, but recent studies like that of Duke University are now finding that aerobic exercise produces the same brain chemicals as anti-depressants, without the drug side effects. There are only two requirements for joining this community: 1) have fun, and 2) be able to walk forward. (Though I have seen people in wheelchairs do it, so perhaps there’s only the one requirement. There are also blind dancers, who always knows where they’re supposed to be.) Beginning can be a little intimidating. To an outsider the dances look complicated and rehearsed, and it’s not uncommon for new dancers to try to sit out because they think they’ll embarrass themselves. Experienced contra dancers make a point of getting new people dancing and feeling successful, and they offer a lot of encouragement. My father, a nationally-recognized caller says: “When we get a new couple we always try to break them up so they can learn with an experienced partner.”

My parents are part of the Childgrove Country Dancers, a group that organizes dances in the greater St. Louis area. They communicate at dances, over the phone, and through their Facebook page. This group is quirky and whimsical, even for contra dance groups. According to my mom, theme nights include: Talk Like a Pirate Day, Bat Girl’s Birthday, Polka Dots on Parade, and New Year’s Eve Tuxedo Ball. And the Funky Contra Sock Club is always cheering on the latest crazy sock discoveries. When I was entering my teenage years the whimsy made me cringe, but now I realize it’s just good harmless fun.

For the most part, the contra community is open and accepting of all things, but there are a few unspoken rules. 1: if someone asks you to dance, and you do not have a partner already, you can’t straight out deny them, instead if you really do not wish to dance with them you must sit the dance out. 2: be conscious of body sweat, use a towel and change your drippy shirt. (This one needs no explanation, it’s just gross and you shouldn’t subject your fellow dancers to it.) 3: be polite and safe. 4: Do all the flourishes and twirls you like as long as you get to the next move on time.

Mom says contra is easy and fun for people from 4 to 94. It’s a community of happy people who love to dance, hug, share great music and welcome new dancers. Whoooo!