

Ten Reasons Not to Book

by Eric Engles

Why is the practice of “booking” a partner for the next dance during the current dance so well established in many dance communities, despite its many negative consequences? Perhaps it is because many dancers are unaware of those consequences and don’t realize that the effects of booking ahead extend beyond the person who asks for the next dance and the person who accepts. This list is intended to create a better awareness of what booking ahead—both the asking and the accepting—can do to a dance community. It is hoped that this knowledge will cause dancers to reflect on the social consequences of their individual behavior, and consider modifying that behavior.

Booking ahead is bad for the dance community because...

1. Booking ahead begets more booking ahead. When dancers who don’t book ahead encounter a situation in which booking ahead is common—at the end of a dance, everyone of the opposite gender around them “already has a partner”—they are powerfully motivated to begin booking ahead as well. If they don’t, they are likely to have to sit out involuntarily.

2. Booking ahead creates a kind of class structure in the dance community. Those who ask ahead and get asked ahead form an in-crowd or clique; those who don’t ask ahead and don’t tend to get asked are forced to the margins and excluded. The resulting class structure is contrary to the inclusive, community spirit of contra dancing, and it becomes self-perpetuating.

3. Booking ahead gives a subset of dancers privileged access to the best spots on the floor. Able to find each other more quickly than those who look for a partner only after a dance ends, those who have booked ahead are able to claim spots at the top of the hall and in the center line. In addition to having a variety of negative consequences for non-bookers, this dynamic strengthens “center-line syndrome” and reinforces the class structure noted in Reason #2. (See also Reason #8.)

4. Booking ahead turns off new dancers. When a new dancer experiences a contra dance as a popularity contest, he or she is far less likely to return. In many areas, there is a direct correlation between the prevalence of advance booking and declining dance attendance.

5. Booking ahead gives new dancers fewer opportunities to improve. When booking ahead is prevalent, the less-experienced dancers—who form a disproportionate segment of the “lower class” dancers—have few opportunities to dance with the experienced dancers who can teach them the most.

6. Booking ahead exacerbates the problems created by a gender imbalance. A gender imbalance can force some people to sit out involuntarily; if most

of the opposite-gender folks are already booked when the dance ends, it becomes difficult for those sitting out to get into the next dance. And booking ahead is also bad for you because...

7. You risk offending people. It is difficult to always remember your advance bookings. And you know what happens when you don’t remember—you make one person angry, and at least one other person ends up thinking you’re a jerk.

8. You restrict your social networks. If you are always pre-selecting your partners, you are less likely to dance with new and unfamiliar people who could be potential new friends (or better dancers than you think).

9. You close the door to the joys of chance and spontaneity. Dancing with someone because he or she ends up in your vicinity after the end of a dance means being open to immediacy, possibility and diversity of experience. It teaches you to see the positives in every person and situation, to give up your need to always be in control.

10. You take yourself out of the here-and-now. When you participate in the culture of advance booking, your mind is engaged either with remembering who your next partner is or figuring out who you should ask for the next dance (those who book more than one dance ahead may be doing both...). With part of your mind so occupied, you can’t be fully in the present, enjoying the pleasures of the dance.

What you can do

- If there are people with whom you absolutely must dance, then ask them to be your partner before the dancing begins or during the break.
- If someone asks you for the next dance while you are dancing with him or her, simply say, “I’d love to dance with you, but I don’t book ahead.”
- Make a point of dancing with newcomers and people who sat out the last dance. Do everything you can to make a contra dance an inclusive, welcoming, cooperative, community-oriented experience for everyone.

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