

Hive Mind—Collaborations

a crowd-sourced column

Every group is eager for fresh ideas for particular challenges. The Hive Mind is a crowd-sourced column with readers sharing insights about different subjects. Our thanks to caller Scott Higgs, column coordinator, and to the participants. In this issue: with limited time and resources, it's tempting for volunteer organizers to focus solely on their own groups. Often, though, cultivating connections with related groups reaps great benefits, with modest effort—whether it's sharing sound systems, mailing lists or booking cooperatively to attract distant talent.

Sean McCutcheon of Montreal, QC says:

When I first began organizing a contradance series in Montreal I did everything myself, including booking bands and callers. Then Nicholas Williams, of the great band Crowfoot, suggested that Montreal collaborate with his hometown, Ottawa, which, for years, has had a well-attended contra dance on the first Saturday of each month, and with his father, Roger Williams, one of the main organizers of the Ottawa dance. Why not invite the same caller and band to perform in Ottawa on Saturday and then in Montreal the next day, on Sunday, Nicholas asked? Why not book mini-tours?

For the past eight years, Ottawa and Montreal have been co-booking. It makes sense for organizers, bands, and callers.

Ottawa and Montreal are a little more than two hours apart, by car. Most bands and callers come up to us from the northeast US. A two-city mini-tour means at least 30 percent less driving and related travel time and expense than would two separate gigs. During one weekend on the road bands and callers can not only play for two evening dances, one in each city, but also, occasionally, pack in special sessions—on contra style, waltzes, squares, ECD, etc.—on Friday evening and the two following afternoons, for a maximum of five gigs.

Co-booking is efficient for organizers too. After some years of refining, here's our simple system. At the beginning of the calendar year, an organizer representing Montreal (myself) begins exchanging emails with an organizer representing Ottawa (Emily Addison), listing bands and callers our communities would like to have for the coming season. This joint decision-making is easy, for we have shared tastes. One organizer (Emily) then sends out mini-tour invitations, collates responses, adjusts plans to match the availability of the talent, and produces a schedule for the season. We then independently send out letters confirming the agreement with the performers for each of the two legs of each weekend mini-tour.

Bev Bernbaum of Toronto, ON says:

It's a lovely combination, calling the Ottawa Contra Dance and then Contra Montreal. It's like the older sibling and the younger sibling. The Ottawa dance has been in existence for 20+ years and the Montreal dance is relatively newly reborn. The Ottawa dancers are older, quieter, more...refined? And the Montreal dancers are younger, noisier, and full of raw bouncy energy. Both dances are so wonderful in very different ways and they complement each other well. It's a pleasure to be a part of them both.

Luke Donforth of Burlington, VT says:

As a traveling caller, I really appreciate when organizers work with other dances in their area to facilitate trips and tours. Ottawa and Montreal are an excellent example of community; working closely together to bring in outside talent. I wouldn't call at either one as often as I do without their collaboration.

Keith Holmes of Houston, TX says:

Since 2009, the dance groups in Oklahoma City, OK, and Austin, Dallas, and Houston, TX have collaborated in producing an annual English country dance weekend in March or April. The event, called Set for Spring, rotates between the four cities. The ECD community in each city is relatively small; rotating Set for Spring reduces the work and risk of burnout for the organizers as well as the financial risk to each group. Each dance group produces an event that is unique to its city but takes advantage of shared resources such as the mailing list, a logo and web graphics, decorations, digital archives, and the setforspring.org domain name. Sometimes, if an event does especially well financially, that group will donate a few hundred dollars to the group that is producing the next year's event. The collaboration has worked extremely well.

How has your group approached the challenge of accommodating new people and ideas, avoiding burnout, and keeping everyone happy? Please share your stories at www.cdss.org/hive by October 1st. We welcome both success stories and cautionary tales.