

USING YOUR TALENTS: How to book, work with, and help improve your callers, musicians, and sound techs - *Jeff Spero & Eric Black*

This session will explore how to help get the best performances out of your callers, musicians and sound techs. Talent at dances are most often providing their services at well below the standard rate for what they provide. We will discuss how to keep your talent happy to continue making your dance event the best it can be. It all stems from proper communication skills. Topics to be covered will be determined by the attendees and may include effective booking, artistic control, balancing the desires of the talent with the desires of the dancers (they are not always the same!), nurturing local talent, constructive criticism, and open mic/band dances.

This session will be led by caller and dance producer Eric Black (San Francisco) and caller, musician and former dance producer Jeffrey Spero (Los Angeles). This session will not be a lecture, but will be a forum to share ideas from the group. Both Eric and Jeff have years of experience (and our own opinions) to help guide the discussion.

“Using your Talent” workshop with Jeff Spero and Eric Black

(notes taken by Lyn Mead)

How best can we provide feedback to talent?

Remember everyone is doing their damndest.

Offer criticism without criticizing.

Find out if callers, sound techs and band members are open to hearing feedback before they actually grace the dance with their talent. Chat ahead of the gig. Ask them if they'd like to hear feedback afterwards.

The only member of the talent pool that should be given feedback during the event is the sound tech, and this should be done through the organizer whenever workable.

If there's an immediate safety issue, such as a slippery floor, the caller should be asked to announce this.

Does local talent subsidize out-of-town bands?

Charge more for out-of-town caller and band dances.

SWROC is becoming a coalition and will be working with CDSS to help local organizers book talent in conjunction with other regional sites. This should work to help minimize aggregate travel costs.

How do we encourage traveling bands to consider coming back to our town?

One-stop-shop towns have fewer out-of-town bands coming to their dances.

Treat them like family. Put them up. Show them around town. Give them (complimentary) tickets to the zoo. Take them to the museum. Offer to shuttle them to their desired destinations. Ask their diet preferences ahead of time. Cook for them or take them out to dinner. Gift them with chocolate and airline miles.

Offer them a minimum fee guarantee.

Foster a community of dancers that seeks them out for special birthday and wedding dances and offers to fund (part of) the cost.

Help network with other local individuals and organizations to book them for house concerts and musicians' workshops to extend their stay, and make it (even) more worth their while to come.

Newer talent is often willing to pay their own airfare so that they get the exposure in new locales.

What if out-of-town bands cancel on us (repeatedly)?

Don't hesitate to choose to consider only other bands instead. Spread the word.

How do we show respect to sound techs?

A “thank you” from the stage is always nice!

Token gifts from the organizer are appreciated, based on the perceived preferences of the tech.

Be kind when offering feedback.

The organization is at risk if the sound person is not paid.

The sound person should be seen as one of the “performers”.

Inform (or have the band inform) the sound tech upfront what the band’s sound requirements will be. The tech is working for the band.

What if a local band has a regional following?

Sometimes a local, (overly-)familiar band can be another regional town’s “hot” group.

How do we best communicate with bands or callers who aren’t “cutting it”?

If they’re marginal local bands, it’s difficult to “not book them”.

Exposure is an opportunity for new talent to develop. Periodically (regularly) provide a dance that offers new callers and bands the chance to try.

Don’t book them. If they persist in asking for gigs, tell them you’ve received negative feedback and offer specific steps to improve. This is the organizer’s responsibility. Do a “let’s have lunch” one-on-one.

Be sure it’s not a “passing style” issue regarding the discontent with the band or caller.

Hire a musician from out of town to train them.

Convene a callers’ group or attend a local jam to listen to new talent. Organizers can encourage board members (if there are any) to do the same.

Encourage musicians to dance!

Ask other dancers what their perceptions are before passing judgment. Each person has his or her own preferences.

What if a band wants to put out a tip jar?

There was general agreement that this should be done on agreement with the organizer, and only if there is no gate charge, or possibly for a “trip fund”. It can be perceived as uncouth otherwise.

USING YOUR TALENTS: HANDOUT (Eric Black & Jeff Spero)

Palo Alto Contra Dance Information For Callers and Musicians

Seventh Draft, Updated 01/20/2012

1. **Location.** Unless otherwise specified (e.g., special events, scheduling conflicts with the church, etc.) the Palo Alto contra dance is held at the First United Methodist Church, 625 Hamilton Ave, Palo Alto, CA 94301. Map and directions can be found at http://www.bacds.org/series/contra/palo_alto/

2. **Schedule.** The dance normally runs on 2nd, 4th, and 5th Saturdays from 8pm to 11pm, with a break of about 15 minutes approximately half way through. Setup and sound check are from 7pm to 8pm in the main hall. There's a beginners session / newcomer's welcome at 7:30. Callers, it's your choice whether to teach it or to have us provide a teacher; either way, please let us know your preference early so that we can schedule someone to run the session if necessary.

3. **Loading in and out.** As seen in "Instruments" (below), we've got a piano; we provide sound, so you shouldn't have to carry very much. If you're not carrying much, park on the street on either Webster or Hamilton, and enter through the front. (The church complex has an open courtyard on the North side of Hamilton, near the northeast corner with Webster. Entering the courtyard, go to the right. By 7:00, when you arrive for sound check, we should have out a sign that says "contra dance upstairs".) In any case, go through a glass door in the building on your right - about 2S feet into the courtyard - and up the stairs.

The dance is upstairs, but there is an elevator if you need to bring in heavy gear. For best access to the elevator, enter through the door facing the church parking lot off Byron St between Hamilton and University. If that door is locked, go around and enter using the above directions, and the dance manager can open the back door for you.

4. **Contact info.** For questions in advance, email Alan Winston, winston@slac.stanford.edu. Someone (probably Joyce Fortune, who organizes dance managers) will get in touch with you the week of your booking - or earlier - to let you know who is the onsite manager for that night, exchange cellphone information, etc.

5. **Dance Program.** We look for a high-energy evening of mostly longways contra dances, perhaps with a circle or scatter mixer early in the evening. If you can call a terrific fun square or triplet that works for beginners, great, but if you don't nobody will miss it. Our opening dance starts at 8:00, we typically have a waltz about 9:20 and then a 15-minute break, coming back from the break with a hambo. (This year we've been playing recorded music for couple dancing during the break, and we'd be happy to play couple dances from *your* band's CD if you have one.) Sometimes we have a contra medley (using only figures introduced before the break) as the first contra after the break. There's a last waltz, and the program ends at 11:00. We don't have to get out of the hall immediately, so it's not the end of the world if you run a few minutes over. Please use your own judgment and experience to make variations in this program template - you don't have to follow it exactly.

6. **Sound Equipment.** We supply a sound system and a person to set it up and run it. Our normal gear includes:

- * 7 assorted microphones (one of which is reserved for the caller if the caller doesn't bring his/her own mic)

- * a mixer with 8 channels (including one reserved for the caller) that take either XLR mic inputs or unbalanced 1/4" line-level inputs, and 2 additional channels that take 1/4" line-level inputs only

- * two stage monitors, normally running a single monitor mix, but we can have as many as four monitor mixes if you bring 1-2 powered monitors with you, or make arrangements with us in advance.

[Note: Our regular kit has lots of XLR mic cables, but only one or two shielded cables with 1/4"

connectors. If you have devices with 1/4" line-level outputs and aren't bringing your own cables, please let us know in advance.]

If you will need more mics, more channels, more monitors or multiple monitor mixes, if you have instruments that produce Hi-Z instrument-level signals, or if you have other unusual equipment or special requests regarding sound, we may be able to accommodate you, but please let us know in advance.

We don't provide a wireless mic, but we're happy to hook up your base station if you bring one.

7. Instruments. The church provides a grand piano in good condition and tune; band should bring all other instruments.

8. Pay. Our standard formula is to provide staff with 60% of the gate (usually \$10 general; \$8 members; \$5 students, plus "pay as you can", sometimes increased for special evenings) divided into one share for the caller, up to three shares for the band, and a half-share for the sound engineer. (We're happy to portion out that 60% in any way all the staff agree on, but let the dance manager know of any changes at the beginning of the evening.) The other 40% goes to BACDS. In case of low attendance, a \$50 minimum share (\$25 for sound engineer) is guaranteed, capped at \$150/band unless other arrangements have been made. For traveling staff with higher expenses we have some flexibility in negotiating higher admission prices and minimum payments; let's talk about it before confirming the booking. You're very welcome to sell CDs or other merchandise from the lip of the stage during the dance.

9. Typical attendance. Attendance is still on an upward swing. There've been a few low-ish nights, but we've had quite a few with attendance about 90, even on nights with no out-of-town superstars. The average this quarter is over 70. We're seeing more evenings that finish with two lines, but finishing with one fullish one (16-18 couples) still happens.

10. Food. The dance seeds, and the dancers bring food for, a potluck snack table at the dance. Staff are welcome to partake of the food from there, and if you ask the dance manager(s) we can deliver food and drink to the stage for you. (This really is snacky stuff, not a replacement for dinner.) If you have food allergies or restrictions, let the dance manager know when you ask for food, and they'll do what they can.

11. After-dance social. After the dance ends at 11, dancers often go to the the Palo Alto Creamery Fountain and Grill, located at 566 Emerson St, Palo Alto, CA 94301. Restaurant phone (650) 323-3131. Serves upscale diner food and ice cream. (That's a few blocks West on Hamilton from the dance; far enough for most people to drive.) You need to get through the door before midnight but they'll serve everybody who's seated by then. If it's happening there'll be an announcement; if you'd like it to happen, let the dance manager know by the break and we can make an announcement.

12. Lodging. We can arrange hospitality for out-of-town bands and callers. If you'd like us to find you a host, let us know if you have any pet allergies, dust/mold allergies, food restrictions/preferences, or other issues that might affect the choice of housing for your visit.

13. Touring staff. If you'd like our help in arranging Bay Area/Northern California tours, we'd be happy to share your info and dates with local programmers. Let us know! We also have some flexibility in coordinating special dances on nights other than our usual, so if you're in the area but busy on our Saturday, let us know anyway - we'll see if we can put something together.