



Puttin' on the Dance Session Notes

“Building Community Through Gender Role Free Dancing”

With Chris Ricciotti

Transcribed by: Judy Hawkins

Chris Ricciotti

Chris started out by giving us an overview of the history of gender free dancing... his handout has a much more detailed and thorough account than my notes, so I'll just mention the highlights.

Carl Wittman's experience and influence as an RSCDS certified dance instructor – in the San Francisco area, in the early 1970's, meeting strong disapproval from the dance community there for dancing with his partner. They moved to Oregon to an area in which artists' community and gay lesbian community were strong. There, he taught English and Scottish country-dance in the traditional fashion, to all ages and orientations, encouraging anyone to dance with anyone as they liked. He was challenged to find terminology to replace the gendered calls, and experimented with terms such as Reds and Greens, left file, right file, 1st corner and 2nd corner. Later he and his partner moved to North Carolina, where he started the Sun Assembly, which has lasted as a dance tradition with gender-free calling.

The tradition of gender free dancing has survived in both Oregon and North Carolina; in Oregon as the Heather and Rose. People who are comfortable in the tradition report that they find the gendered calling and expectations of other dance communities to be uncomfortable and confining. When dancers from conventional gendered dance communities come to the gender-free communities and want to know why they don't “just teach with gendered calls like everyone else in the tradition” the answer is simply “this is our tradition.”

In St Paul, a dance community was established using only completely symmetrical dances, and they asked visiting callers to make no reference to gender roles at all. This worked for a while, but was found to be rather limiting – fewer dances, and in general less interesting, less challenging. This group dwindled over time and folded in the late 1990's, although recently there have been folks from the northeast who are working to revive this group, and experimenting with their own approach.

In the northeast, Cindy Green and other callers have experimented themselves with trying to find different ways of identifying roles.

Chris himself, as a boy, loved square dancing in school and in the 4H in Coventry, Rhode Island. His 4H mentors saw how much he loved it and suggested he learn to call. He

went on to learn singing squares, and to call competitively. (Chris's handout has a much more complete account of his history!)

In the 1980's Chris got involved with contra dancing (calling with the conventional gendered terms) and came out as a gay man. In 1986 at a gay men's singing group in Denver he was introduced to the concept of gay rodeo and gay square dancing, at which point he knew he had found his calling.

In 1987 Chris started a gay/lesbian contra dance in Jamaica Plain, using the gendered terms for roles; in 1989 his dancers challenged him to come up with something more suitable to the community, and after some thought and experimentation, he came up with using ribbons to identify the role that, in conventional calling would be the gent's role: ribbons because they are easy to put on and take off, and also because they provide a visual cue to the dancers themselves. The first night he tried it, the dancers gave it a standing ovation.

In 1990, Chris asked NEFFA about leading a session on gender-free dancing; unbeknownst to him, this created a huge controversy among the organizers of NEFFA. Larry Jennings' view was that it would be inappropriate not to consider it; there was a lot of support for the idea, but also a number of people who rejected the idea. These were the same people who didn't like other innovations. NEFFA accepted Chris's session, and there has been a lively and well attended gender-free session at NEFFA since then.

For the younger folks in the mainstream tradition, dancing without reference to gender roles is attractive – it's risqué, especially dancing with the opposite gender in swapped roles – and provides a sense that they value of doing things together as a group of young people, without the restrictions of convention. Young dancers often prefer to just dance together with their friends and not be bothered with who is what gender identity.

When Chris calls for other groups than specifically gender-free dances, he does a lot of gender-free calling without saying that's what he's doing – just inviting anyone to dance with anyone. It makes the dance more inclusive.

When he has conversations with contra dancers from the mainstream dances, in contexts outside of dancing, he finds that contra dancers tend to know only the folks of the opposite gender who they dance with, not the fellow contra dancers of the same gender. He observes that gender-free dancing gives dancers a much higher awareness of the whole dance, of how the different roles interact, and that fosters better problem solving within the dance.

At this point he turned the session towards discussion. The following is a verbatim transcript of my notes, using square brackets to show where I've completed sentences and filled in context.

Role based dancing allows the caller to call many more kinds of dances.

Switching roles is lots of fun.

The downtown Amherst Wednesday night dance gets lots of students [who often like to dance in any role irrespective of gender].

The Hampshire [College] Contra dance collective wants a gender-free dance; lots of students swap roles; role but not gendered as a few of the dances in any given evening

Lisa Greenleaf's [approach to calling] stylish dances: "find a partner – ok, now you're dancing the other role"

[Gender-free dancing requires] extra teaching about – swing, [ladies/barearm] chain and courtesy-turn.

[This helps] get [dancers] over the hump [to become comfortable]

"who ends the swing" is the defining characteristic of the gender-free style [who ends up on the right]

English [is] easier to switch roles – more symmetrical

issues outside the dance floor influence attitudes – hostility about dismantling of gender/sexual roles

barn dancing – kids – very inclusive

a lot of women really want to dance with a man

in NY – always a surplus of women

Vermont – surplus of men

solving the imbalance:

when two women are paired up they can go to the head of the set

confining to dance in one role only

"I want to dance with everyone"

Women really enjoy dancing in the traditional men's role

Thinking about dancing rather than gender role – The pattern is what you're participating in

what happens is that – long term – doubling the length of the dance if you swap roles at the bottom of the dance [that is, a 32 bar dance becomes a 64 bar dance, if the roles do different things and you swap – more challenging, therefore more interesting]

[This allows one to] to break out of “I'm only interacting with half the people in the dance”

more people – straight couples – who are dancing in reversed roles

thinking globally – owning the whole dance – being a dance “angel” [who can, when things break down] tell people where to go

Chris – as a dance instructor – teaching couple dances – guys who don't know the women's part trying to teach it [are less successful] – women tend to know both roles much more strongly

Plattsburgh [New York area dances, there is] not much attachment to roles.

BIDA – discussion – young folks want to be able to swap roles, dance with whoever – but also don't like the armbands ??? but what else??? [using verbal terms such as] bananas and oranges – this loses the visual cues –

[in conventional gendered dancing, you have as] visual cues – skirts and pants

“Your choice” -- allemande a bunch of times – your attachment to the visual cue gets broken – oh, this is fun!

[Dancing with folks unfamiliar with gender-free dancing] part of my role when I'm swapping roles I need to know not only where I need to be but where they need to be so it's NOT confusing [to them] -- “uhoh – am I in the wrong place?”

in the progression and swing – as a man dancing the traditional women's role if I put [my partner on the left] it's easier for them

[discussion of the pluses and minuses of various types of swing – two hand turn, ballroom, gender-role-free swing]

Chris was using the gender-role free swing at NEFFA, [dancing in the traditional women's role] until a guy said “damn it, if you're going to dance that role then at least dance it right!!”

“Oh, yeah! You know, that's good!”

Women who've danced the men's role tend to be more comfortable speaking up for themselves

Men who overswing out of discomfort [when they find themselves in a neighbor swing with a man – you can] walk the swing, [that helps them get more] relaxed – cools them off.

Women who want to swing FAST – aggressive young women cranking you in the twirl

Twirling – height difference

[Contra dancing as] low impact social interaction [a phrase the session on marketing came up with]

We're primates – beyond [our own] partnerships – more touching [at a contra dance] than anywhere else in your week.

Chris – 1994 – experience at dance camp –

“here comes another woman... another man... another man... another woman...”

switched to

“oh, here comes Shirley – John – Ruth ...”