

## **WHAT IS CONTRA DANCING?**

Contra dancing is a form of North American folk dance in which the dancers form two parallel lines that run the length of the hall. In its simplest form, it is danced by pairs of couples. One lady and gent face another lady and gent. Under the direction of a caller, each couple dances a sequence of figures with each other and with the other couple, for 64 beats of live music. Then each couple moves forward to meet another couple, and they repeat the same figures. When a couple reaches the end of the line of couples, it turns around and comes back the other way. Eventually each couple dances with every other couple in the set.

Normally, the caller teaches each dance before it is actually done to music. This gives everyone an idea of what to expect, and an opportunity to practice the figures. The caller calls each figure just before it is about to begin, hence the dancers can perform the figures in time to the music. Once the dancers appear to have mastered a particular dance, the caller may choose to stop calling, leaving the dancers to enjoy the movement with music alone. Many of the basic figures in contra dancing are similar to those in square dancing. Listed below are some of the most common contra dance figures. When a couple stand side by side, normally the lady is on the right and the gent on the left.

### **What to expect at your first dance**

Beginners are welcome and you do not need to have any prior dance experience. Also, you do not need to bring a dance partner with you. A beginners class starts at 7:30 PM so you will learn everything that you need to know to be able to contra dance. The dance starts at 8 PM and ends at 11 PM. We also recommend that you dance with experienced dancers, rather than dancing with other beginners, since your experienced partner can guide you through the dance. Anyone may ask anyone else to dance so don't be shy about finding a partner and getting on the dance floor.

### **What should I wear?**

Wear loose, comfortable clothing, and dress to stay cool since you can expect to sweat. Many of us bring an extra shirt to change into partway through the dance.

### **Shoe policy**

To protect our floors:

- Shoes must be clean and soft-soled
- No spike heels may be worn; heels must be wider than 3/4 inch

## Figures for Two Dancers

**BALANCE:** Holding one or both hands, each dancer takes two steps toward the other, and two back.

**SWING:** In ballroom position, each dancer walks around the other. Optionally, this can be performed more like a pivot, with the right foot held in and a scooter-like "buzz" step used. There are several variants to the ballroom position. A swing always ends with the lady on the right and the gent on the left.

**ALLEMANDE:** The dancers walk around each other, holding right (left) hands with fingers pointing up.

**GYPSY:** Similar to a swing or allemande, but with eye contact only.

**DOS-à-DOS:** (also known as do-si-do) The dancers walk around each other, remaining back-to-back, passing right shoulders as they move forward and left shoulders as they return.

**SEE-SAW:** A dos-à-dos in the opposite direction.

**BOX the GNAT:** Holding right hands throughout, lady and gent face each other. Each moves forward and makes a half turn (lady to the left and gent to the right) until they finish in each other's original places.

**CALIFORNIA TWIRL:** Lady and gent begin side by side facing in one direction, and finish side by side facing in the opposite direction. They raise their joined hands, and both walk forward in a semicircle, the lady passing under the raised hands and the gent passing outside the lady.

## Figures for Four Dancers

**BALANCE the RING:** Hands held in a ring, all four dancers take two steps forward and two back.

**CIRCLE:** Holding hands in a ring, all four walk to the right (left).

**STAR RIGHT:** Holding right hands in the center, all four walk to the left.

**STAR LEFT:** Holding left hands in the center, all four walk to the right.

**PROMENADE:** Two couples face each other. In skater's position (left hand in left, right hand in right), each couple crosses to where the other couple was standing, the gents passing left shoulders.

**LADIES' CHAIN:** With two couples facing each other, ladies pass each other, taking right hands and giving the left hand to the opposite gent, who turns the lady forward while he walks backward, until both once again face the other couple. The turn portion is called a Courtesy Turn.

**RIGHT and LEFT THROUGH:** Two couples face each other. Each dancer passes the opposite dancer by the right shoulder, optionally taking right hands, then each couple takes left hands for a courtesy turn.

**DOWN the HALL:** Four dancers in line (in an order specified by the caller) walk together away from the music.

**HAY:** All four dancers, with eye contact only, simultaneously dance a figure-eight pattern in which each one returns to the starting place. This is easier to demonstrate than to describe.

## Contra Dance Etiquette

Contra dancing... high energy, whirling, twirling fun! To foster a safe, friendly atmosphere, we offers the following suggestions:

- Wear loose, comfortable **clothing**, and expect to sweat. Many of us bring an extra shirt to change into partway through the dance since we think dancing in a dry shirt is more fun and our partners agree! **Drink lots of water:** Dehydration is no fun, even if water leads to more sweating. Please also wear sturdy, clean, **soft-soled shoes** to protect our floor. Many dancers bring shoes that they put on at the dance.
- Contra dancing, unlike most sports, throws you into the arms of another new person every few seconds. Some dancers are hypersensitive or allergic to highly **scented products** such as perfume, after-shave, cologne, etc., and others react to odors such as spices, onions or garlic. Please be thoughtful in your pre-dance scent application. And, yes, fresh bathing and clean clothing win you points.
- Anyone may **ask anyone else to dance**. Same-gender dance partners are common. To be welcoming and to help people not fear rejection, we also cultivate a community in which you generally accept an invitation to dance unless you have good reason not to.
- Many experienced contra dancers **improvise** during a dance. We encourage artistic expression and experimentation, but being on time

and helping your partner be on time are always more important than nifty embellishments.

- Dancers **flirt** to various degrees. Contra dance flirting is usually meaningless fun, but of course dancers do also find romance on the floor. Please pay attention to your partner's comfort with flirting.
- People dance in close **physical contact**—but please hold yourself so that both you and your partner are comfortable. Remember that your partner's comfort zone may be different from yours!
- **Eye contact** can help prevent dizziness during swings and allemandes. Eye contact is also fun, friendly, and flirty. If you're not comfortable with eye contact, try using your partner's ear, chin, collar, etc., as a dizziness-preventing focus—but be careful not to focus your gaze anywhere that could make your partner uncomfortable (e. g., down at a woman's chest!).
- You should be **comfortable** at a contra dance. However, different people are comfortable in different ways, so dancers can have a mismatch. In the event that someone approaches you or dances with you in a way that makes you uncomfortable, here are some suggestions: Your comments will probably be most effective in person, especially if the other dancer is unintentionally causing you physical pain. We suggest gently and forthrightly saying, "Please don't do X. When you do X, it makes me feel Y. I would prefer it if you do Z." This feedback can help people learn and grow. Remember that in all likelihood this person has no desire to make you uncomfortable and will be appalled at themselves and grateful to you when they find out.
- We welcome **children**. However, please keep your children who are not dancing off the dance floor for safety on all sides.
- Contra dance demands coordination with yourself and with others. **Dancing under the influence**, just like driving, can be a tricky proposition. Please be responsible, especially so that your dancing doesn't impair the rest of the set.