

All

CONTRA DANCING

Published on 03/07/04

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AH: Wholesome folk tradition attracting all ages

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the third in a series on dance groups in the Lowcountry.

One can always spot the newcomer at a Charleston Folk contra dance.

He is the one with the dazed eyes and the mouth agape as a band jams a Celtic-Appalachian-inspired folk tune and dozens of people swing, spin and promenade on an often-crowded dance floor. It is a sight not only to be seen but to be a part of, regardless of experience.

In an age when entertainment typically consists of "spectating" — sports, TV, movies, the Web, concerts — contra dancing offers a wholesome, real, grass-roots, community-oriented alternative. Participants can get a taste of how our ancestors used to spend spare time: dancing, together as a community, to live music.

The twice-monthly local contra dances, just like many held across America, feature a mix of ages. On a recent chilly night, nearly 100 people showed up. In the crowd, there were retirees from the Isle of Palms, baby-boomer hippies, well-groomed young adult professionals, students from the College of Charleston and the Charleston County School of the Arts and even several kids.

This mix is possible, in large part, because of the absence of alcohol, cigarette smoke and the "meat-market" atmosphere present at many bars featuring dancing around town.

Anna Dunlany, 15, was among a group of School of the Arts students and has attended the dances since last May. Her reasons for attending were simple: "I like to dance, and the music is always great."

On the other end of the spectrum, Isle of Palms seniors John and Betty Ebinger and Walter and Mignon Speelman were among the few leaning against the wall, smiling as they watched probably 80 dancers cover a dance floor at the Christian Family Y. "We follow the band," Betty says of the featured band Gaelstorm. "We're groupies."

Barbara Burnet, 50, of West Ashley, attends a Charleston Folk contra dance once every two months. She first found out about the group after attending a folk festival in Black Mountain, N.C.

"I love it. I love the music, the dance and the people. They are so friendly. ... It's a good cardiovascular workout, too," says Burnet, adding that she also likes to see children participating.

Bill Stillway, 64, was among the original contra dancers in Charleston and still enjoys dancing on a regular basis. Part of the joy is being with a network of friends — people who routinely show up for dances — that has formed over the years.

According to avid dancers, contra is a form of American folk dance in which participants form a set of two parallel lines running the length of the dance hall. Each dance consists of a sequence of moves — some mix of swings, spins, promenades, do-si-dos, allemandes — that ends with couples, or two partners, having progressed up or down the set.

That means a couple will dance with every other couple in the set.

A caller gives instructions for each dance before it's done and then the band jams and participants do that specific dance.

One of the first local contra dancers, Dr. Bart Saylor, says he is drawn to the wholesome nature of the dances and adds, "Where else can a guy like me dance toe-to-toe, cheek-to-cheek with 50 good-looking women and then go home with my wife?"

What about his wife doing the same with 50 men? Saylor laughs and jokes, "All the guys are ugly."

WHY IS IT 'CONTRA'?

One question many newcomers ask is why is the dancing called "contra."

Among several theories floating among contra dancers in cyberspace is that the term is a corruption of the French, "contredans," meaning "opposites dance," though most would trace contra dancing back to 17th-century English country dancing.

"The French, who thought that they invented country dancing (as well as anything else culturally significant), and who were miffed at the notion that the English should receive credit for anything, converted the name 'country dance' to French contredans," wrote theorist James Hutson in an article in the fall 1994 issue of Contra Corners.

"The French then turned around and claimed that the English term was a corruption of the French."

Regardless, it found a home in the United States as "contra dancing" and a home in Charleston in 1983.

CHARLESTON FOLK

Years before contra dancing, then-local attorney Edmund Robinson created Charleston Folk to bring folk music concerts to Charleston.

In the early 1980s, a few people who had lived in places where contra dancing was popular came to town and brought the dance form to Charleston Folk.

Among them were Saylor, a forensic psychologist and folk musician, and physician Dr. Robert Anderson.

"It started out small," recalls Saylor, who had experienced contra dancing in the Richmond-Charlottesville, Va., area. "We did a little bit of everything. We arranged them, made lemonade, called dances, performed music. ... We were trying to get it off the ground."

Saylor says contra dancing didn't take off until Anderson got involved. Anderson, a Charleston native who had moved back to town from New England, was involved in international folk dancing, such as Israeli folk dancing, and he "brought us over the hump" in getting the dance group established.

Saylor says group members started going to out-of-town workshops and the Lake Eden Arts Festival, and Charleston Folk "got on the contra dancing map."

"Eventually the concert side of it died off and it became primarily a dance group," says Anderson, who got out of the organizational end of Charleston Folk but still attends dances about once every two months.

Dances were held wherever they could find space, such as Knights of Columbus Hall and Sullivan's Island Elementary School, in the early years. It found its true home in the Unitarian Church's Gage Hall until church leaders asked the group to relocate in recent years.

More recently, the dances have been held in the Christian Family Y building, but it closed at the end of February. Charleston Folk is facing a major challenge: Where does the group go now?

No one has answers. Saylor hopes they can keep it downtown, where the future of contra dancing seems brightest.

FUTURE OF CONTRA

One big difference in the contra-dancing crowd in recent years, organizers have noticed, is young people.

Sometime in the late 1990s, College of Charleston students started showing up in the dozens. That wave of popularity has leveled off a bit, but following it up is another wave of high school students.

Saylor speculates part of the increased interest by youth may lie in the fact that the children of original or regular contra dancers are bringing their friends to dances and the word has spread from there. Saylor has three children — Sara, 19, Paul, 16, and Maggie Jo, 14 — who all enjoy contra dancing.

"They've grown up in that culture and wouldn't miss a contra," says Saylor.

Part of the tradition of contra, Saylor adds, is passing the music and dance to future generations. Last year, he was asked to help a group of students from the School of the Arts to start a contra band and now the group, Anna's Bananas, brings out huge crowds.

"It means we're going to have a good future," says Saylor.

AN EARTHY SET

While there is a cross-section of ages, a Charleston Folk contra dance does seem to draw, generally, a bohemian, neo-hippie crowd. Some men have ponytails and wear tie-dyed shirts and there's even one in a dress. The women seem more natural, wearing little makeup, and wear flowing skirts.

Bottom-line on the garb — it is casual.

Stillway says it would be a "fair generalization" to characterize the contra crowd as a bit hippie.

There are no outright signs of a liberal, or environmental, political bent, but one would wonder how well Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader did among the contra-dancing crowd a few years ago.

Yoga instructor Gary Simmons, 51, has been contra dancing since 1999 and says contra dancers tend to have some common interests.

"You see the contra folk all over the place," he says. "Some are kayakers or bicyclers. Many do yoga. You will see them at the Argentine tango dances and lessons. And, of course, all the cool people go to Earth Fare."

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