

SUGGESTED BASIC CRITERIA FOR BANDS PLAYING A CONTRA DANCE

What does it take to play a contra or square dance?

You can play a contra dance with a set of pots and pans and a harmonica, or you can put together a hot band with fiddle, banjo, flute, pipes, or another melody instrument(s), and an accompanist (e.g., guitar, piano, bass). There are all kinds of musical groups that play dances, but what all contra bands share is a love of playing for dancers, and a rich repertoire of reels, waltzes, jigs, and other forms depending on the dancers and caller. Here are some basic criteria that the Tallahassee Community Friends of Old-time Dance would like bands to consider:

1. Choose appropriate dance tunes and medleys, and make them danceable.

- Reels and jigs work just fine. You can play the same tune over and over, or you can put several together in a set. If you play a set of tunes, make sure the transitions are as smooth as you can make them. A lot of bands like to put a brief stop between tunes.
- The tune(s) played should match the dance to the greatest extent possible. Contra dances have just a few basic footwork moves, including balance and swing. When there are balances in the dance, it is nice to use a tune with accents when the balance occurs. A general rule is to use bouncy tunes for bouncy dances and smooth tunes for smooth figure dances.
- Play two or four strong beats as an intro. Some musicians call it “playing [two or four] potatoes.” Playing two or four strong beats in time with the tune just before the dance starts lets the dancers and the caller know exactly when to start dancing.
- Enhance the backbeat. Melodies are important, but rhythm is more important than melody to a dancer. Spirited playing with a well defined, punchy down beat and “chopped” chords with a strong bass line will give dancers the lift they come to a dance for.
- Maintain a steady tempo. Don’t let it drag or race ahead. Look to the caller for a tempo before you start.
- Break up the arrangement a little for variety. There’s nothing wrong with a little variation within a tune or a dance. Drones, chord substitutions, dropping certain instruments out and featuring others, and/or variations on the melody can change the feel of a dance and make it more interesting and compelling for the dancers. This can also give them a chance to relax when they might be getting tired, but bring them back to full energy by the end of the dance.
- It’s OK to make mistakes, but NEVER stop playing in the middle of a dance. Playing a dance requires different skills and attitudes than playing a session, jam, or performance. Endurance is key. It’s OK to have another player cover you if you get tired or want to take a break.

2. Communicate with each other and the caller. Sit close enough together that you can hear each other. Make sure the caller knows whom he needs to communicate with.

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Your job is to provide what the caller asks for—you're his or her backup band. Work out in advance within the band who's going to call the shots on changes, tempo, and other decisions.

3. Have a professional attitude.
 - Make sure your instruments and other equipment are ready to perform, and that you know how to use your stuff effectively.
 - Bring sufficient reeds, strings, picks, cables, batteries, etc. If you have a pickup on your instrument, make sure it works.
 - Know how to use a microphone, and don't be afraid of it. Tell the sound person what you want or need. Don't chatter, plink, or noodle incessantly while the caller teaches a dance.
 - Show up at the time suggested by the dance organizers. In order for the sound person to do his or her job, they need the band to sit down and be ready to play so that the proper sound levels are set, all equipment is ready to go, and the caller and the band have discussed the program.
4. Pay attention to the dancers. Watch the dancers and acknowledge them. Announce your tunes. Be part of the experience, and make it fun for them. Feed them energy, and they will respond and feed it back to you.
5. Play waltzes at a danceable tempo. Dancers are forgiving, but they don't want a waltz to drag or be so fast it's almost undanceable. Be considerate of older or brand-new waltz dancers.
6. Have fun. Maybe you're having a bad day, or you're not getting along with someone. It happens. But enjoy the moment. Playing for dancers is a privilege and a joy!

How do you learn to play in a dance band?

- Come to a dance. The best contra dance musicians dance at least a little. They don't have to be brilliant dancers, but they know in their brain and body what dancing feels like and how good music enhances that experience. And if you haven't been to a dance, come check it out. We'll even let you in free the first time!
- Ask to sit in with bands playing contra dances. If you want some real-world experience playing a dance, ask to sit in. Sometimes the band might say no, but you can learn a lot by just watching. You don't have to be mic'd. Or you can just sit and observe.
- Practice playing dance music. Playing dances can be hard work. You have to be able to play tunes at whatever tempo the dance caller asks for, and you have to be able physically and mentally to play these tunes over and over again with energy and creativity until the caller gives you the signal to quit.

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Resources:

<http://www.contradancelinks.com/essays.html#LearningMusic>

<http://www.biteyourownelbow.com/contramu.htm>

<http://www.myspace.com/woodpussywhistlepig/blog/27495615>