



Contra Addiction

By Jon Lee Cope
Photos by Ted Tarquinio

Going from apprehensive to avid contra dancer in one magical evening.

I am on the Internet looking for information about contra dancing, trying to get some kind of a heads-up as to what it's all about before I go to the Monday Night Contra Dance, hosted by the Louisville Country Dancers at the Church of the Advent on Baxter Avenue in the Highlands. A friend has invited me, and she tells me that I do not have to worry so much about the "dancing" part — that contra dancing is easy, that I won't be embarrassed, that anyone can do it. She tells me all the things people have told me every single time before I make a spectacle of myself in *every* social dance situation.

Now don't get me wrong; I can dance. I am gay, so dancing is basically part of my DNA. Take me to a wedding and honestly . . . you can't touch this. However, when it comes to any kind of social dancing — swing or ballroom or the minuet — I am a mess. I am so unbelievably right-brained that anything that has to do with remembering numbers escapes me completely. I belong to a group known as the "unchoreographables"; I have never been able to understand what the hokey pokey is all about.

After watching several YouTube videos on the subject (one of which proves that Helen Keller was a better dancer than I am), I start piecing together a history of the dance itself. One article, titled "Simple Calls for Contra Dancers" (I am attracted to the word "simple"), tells me that contra dancing is basically the meeting of new friends set to music. Like an early-America Studio 54. Contra dancing is derived from English country dancing, sort of like what they do

in *Jane Eyre*, and the French, who were irked that the English should receive credit for anything and converted the words "country dance" to *contredanse*, which early Americans shortened to "contra." It is pretty much like the history of french fries.

The article discusses some pretty basic dance steps, or "calls," beginning with the easiest one known to man: the walking step. "This simple dance step is a basic walk to the beat — stay level; do not bounce." And I think to myself, "Even I know how to walk! I've been doing it almost all my life." It is the bouncing part that is going to be bit of a problem (see gay guy reference above).

Before I even set foot in the dance hall, I can hear the Monday Night All Stars tuning up. I hear banjos and guitars and bells and whistles, and I can tell by the cacophony that the band is in great number. My friend tells me that it is an all-volunteer band that comes out to support the contra. This I find astonishing, as I have not seen this many unpaid musicians since "We Are the World." The hall is decorated with twinkling lights hung willy-nilly and quilts on the walls that hark back to the dance's Thirteen Colonies roots. I feel like Harrison Ford in the movie *Witness*: There are happy people all around me, and I am a stranger in a strange, happy land. Everyone is smiling and joyful and just the tiniest bit dewy from the dance. The room is full of diversity: young and old, conservatives and hippies, hipsters and every ampersand you can find (African-Americans and Asians and Native Americans, et al.). Gay people and transgendered people and teenagers and me — one of the unchoreographables.

I tell myself I am not there to dance, that I'm just going to check it out, and about eight people ask to put me on their dance card (I know!) as soon as I hit the door. I think I must look AMAZING, then realize

that being polite and asking a newcomer to dance is part of the contra's social structure. Once I pick my ego off the floor, Ellen Buche, one of the founding members of the Monday contra, approaches. Buche, who declined to share her age, tells me that this group has been dancing this way in this little hall, on and off, for 40 years. She assures me I am in good hands, that in no time I will get the hang of it. Buche drags me to the floor, and I do the walking step to the beat as if to my own execution, trying to stay level. Amazingly enough, I am not bouncing.

The buzz step: Used in a swing, the right foot stays on the floor; the left foot steps to push forward.

The dance has a caller, like you might find in square dancing. He (or she) is kind of like the emcee of the night. Young Bradley Smith, 22, is our caller tonight, and he tells me later that the job is to "enable small amounts of joy." He gauges his success by "how much happiness is in the room." I am not helping this theory as I stand opposite Buche, my partner; I have seen severed heads on *Game of Thrones* who look happier than I do. I realize that there is going to be a brief lesson before we start, and Buche introduces me to the couples in our proximity and tells them that I am new. I am as mortified as an incontinent puppy.

When the music begins, Buche takes my hands and guides me toward her, then pushes me back. We swing with my hand resting on the crook of her hindmost. She is looking me right in the eye. We form a circle with our neighbors to the right; we clasp hands, swing again, my right foot on the floor. And I am back to where we started, somehow, amazingly, with new neighbors and new hands. As we make our way down the line, I realize that I am dancing! I am a country Fred Astaire! I



am dancing not only with Buche but with everybody in the room, all at the same time.

The swinging has a wonderful sense of centrifugal force, and it is best to look at one another to prevent getting dizzy. When I am staring at Buche, and swinging and watching the smile on her face, I fall cinematically in love. The twinkly lights above her head only amplify the effect. I can see the young girl that lives inside this wonderful woman. It is one of the most perfect moments of my whole life. I move from person to person, smile to smile, hand to hand, and all the different people in this dancing utopia suddenly become one and the same. All of them young and vibrant and wholly alive! When the dance is over, Buche looks at me squarely and asks me what I thought. I tell her, making an assumption, “How he must have loved you.” She blushes and understands.

She tells me that 40 years ago, a woman named Marie Cassidy — a woman before her time who taught dance classes at Bel-larmine University — started the group. At age 101, the woman has outlived three husbands. She became smitten when she attended a contra dance in 1956 and even did a hula demonstration at the centennial of her birth. She has been quoted as saying, “The meaning of life is to dance.” Buche tells me that the Monday-night contra is Cassidy’s legacy. You can feel Cassidy’s spirit in the room, and even though she now resides in a care facility, several folks here tonight tell me that she still dances every day.

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Allemande: Centrifugal force associated with rotation creates tension, but hold elbow up to keep the right distance between dancers.

There is something so wonderfully simple and romantic about the contra, and as the weeks pass I realize that I am becoming a part of a community. At the risk of generalization, I find that every Monday hopeless romantics surround me. I fit right in. If you can imagine a farming community of old, the populace scattered into vast parcels of land, it is clear how the dance was designed to help with life’s procreative needs. Young people of marrying age would be able to gather and dance together. A boy and a girl could easily fall for each other, pushed forward by the centrifugal force of the allemandes. Built into the dance is a courtship; flirty steps, eye contact, twirling skirts and strong hands accelerate romance.

“Uncle” Fred Fischer, who has been dancing with the group for some 26 years, tells me, “The contra is a wonderful way to fall in love 15 minutes at a time.” Ken Shepherd, another original member, notes that there are no cell phones in the room. There is no rule about this, and let me point out at that least half of the dancers in the hall are Millennials. Clearly a girl (or a boy) in a twirly skirt, a live band and human interaction trump Instagram and Facebook if you play your cards just right.

One night I bring my nephew/son to the dance after he had been “friend-zoned” by a young woman he was interested in. I adopted him when he was 14. I only tell you this because, as a gay man, when it came time to talk to the boy about the delicate dance that happens between men and women, I often found myself lacking. (Being able to attract women has never been a problem for me, but only because I’m really good at telling them how to accessorize.)

When we enter the hall, I am once again in a movie. There is my son, the leading man, handsome and shy and filmed in cinemascope. A tracking shot goes all the way down the line to the most beautiful girl in the whole room. She can see that the boy is a newcomer, unsure of what to do next. I watch as she makes her way through the crowd, her blond hair flowing and backlit by the twinkly lights. She asks him if he would like to dance. I see him nod yes. She takes his arm, places one hand in hers, the other at her small waist, and she looks him in the eyes. The music starts, and I watch him move her about the floor with grace and confidence that I did not realize he possessed. He is smiling and so is she. He dances the entire night, and like the wise parent I am, I leave him to it and let nature and centrifugal force work their magic.

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Long lines forward and back: All dancers join hands with the dancers beside them to form “long lines.” These two lines in unison (ideally) take four steps together, then four steps backward.

It really is like *Pride and Prejudice* meets Woodstock on these Monday nights, and I have grown to love them. I am becoming a better dancer and even manage a flourish every now and again. I have accepted myself into this odd group. Buche tells me that acceptance of “all people is built into the very structure of the dance.”

The Monday Contra nearly withered a few years ago, its numbers dwindling into the low teens. The elders of the group began to court young people, hoping to carry on the tradition of contra on the corner of Baxter and Breckenridge. These days the room is bursting with the young and the young at heart. On any given Monday, in that wonderful little hall, more Louisvillians touch hands, lock eyes and acknowledge one another’s humanity than anywhere else in this entire city. All are welcome, even the unchoreographed. ■