

Sarah Winchenbach

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Subject Specific

The Joy of Contra

It's the first Friday night of November, and the streets and buildings of Belfast, Maine are vacant except for Alexia's Pizza on the corner of Main Street and the American Legion Hall on High Street, where vehicles are parked alongside the street and in the empty lot of an old gas station across from the hall. Men, women, children, and teens getting out of vehicles, make their way into the brightly lit hall. Women and girls are wearing long skirts and light coats for warmth on top, although the weather is unusually mild tonight. Through the windows you can see people inside starting to form a line, and there's laughter and loud chattering escaping from the open doors, and what sounds like a violin warming up. Unlike most nights when the crowd at the Legion Hall are bingo players or sponsoring a Veterans of Foreign War dinner, the people piling in tonight are gathering here for a much livelier communal: a night of contra dancing put on by Belfast Flying Shoes.

It's not what most call mainstream, and most teens and young adults haven't even heard of contra dancing, or if they have, they usually follow up with, "Isn't it square dancing for hippies?" And it is—sort of, but that's more the exception than the rule. Coming together for a night of contra dancing, attracts people from all walks of life—from a first grade school teacher, to a nurse's assistant, to more recently, high school students. It's a music filled, foot stomping night of grabbing a partner and dancing a series of folk style line dances to a live band, as a man or woman calls out the moves to guide dancers down the line. Although it's closely associated these days with the hippie culture, contra was actually started at the end of the 17th century, in

France. When square dancing became popular in the United States during the early 1900s, contra became less so. It wasn't until the 50s and 60s that a real revival in folk dancing came. Contra has since become recognized in other parts of the world and is perhaps most common in North America, particularly the New England area.

There aren't many rules. Simply grab a partner and find a line to jump into. It doesn't matter who you dance with—woman or a man, whether your own gender or not. It's common to see girls dancing together, and many women like to take a turn at the gent's role. "I'm a woman, and if I want to lead I can. It's the egalitarianism of [contra dancing] that I like," says Chrissy Fowler, popular caller and co-founder of Belfast Flying Shoes contra dances. The atmosphere is family friendly—no drugs or alcohol are allowed. Fun is found merely in dancing to good music and meeting new people.



When I arrive tonight with my sister and our friend at Belfast Flying Shoes contra dance, a monthly dance I have been coming to for over a year, it's just after eight o'clock, but the Legion Hall is already packed with five lines of colorfully dressed dancers, stretching from one end of the hall to the stage at the other. Women and girls are wearing loose dresses and skirts that spin like a top when their wearer is twirled. Some of the men are wearing skirts and sarongs, but this is normal at a contra. They are cooler to wear than pants and I've heard that they twirl better too. Most of the men are wearing shorts though, and a lot of people are in t-shirts. No one is wearing anything too warm; once you get moving it doesn't take long to get hot.

The featured band tonight is Crowfoot, a trio whose members are from Canada, the United States, and England. Nicholas Williams plays the wooden flute and the accordion, switching between the two on different songs. Jaige Trudel is the violinist in the group, and Adam Broome is keeping the beat on guitar. Right now the group is playing what sounds like a Scottish folk jig. Keeping dancers in sync by calling out orders like “neighbors, allemande left,” and “partners, twirl,” is caller Will Mentor from Vermont. He is taking over for Chrissy Fowler, who is dancing tonight but is usually the primary caller at Belfast.

I walk past the lines of twirling men and women to a white, plastic table next to the wall that people have loaded with coats, backpacks, and water bottles. I add my own bag and long-sleeved shirt to the table, and take off my Birkenstocks and gray socks. Many of the dancers here tonight aren't wearing shoes. It's typical at a contra to dance barefoot, and most people prefer feeling the wood floor with their toes. Though they aren't as affective at making stomping noises as shoes are, bare feet are often the more comfortable way to dance. This type of dancing is about feeling comfortable and free and not so much about looks or being fancy.



A few moments later the caller signals to the band to play one last round of the upbeat Irish tune dancers are moving along to. Each dance usually lasts eight or ten minutes and ends when the music suddenly slows down and the band stops playing entirely. Then the lines break, you let go of your partner's hand, thank him or her, and join the dancers in ear rattling applause for the band. Tonight, this is followed by caller Will Mentor saying, “Find a new partner for the next contra.” I am asked to dance by a man who has come all the way from the Auburn/Lewiston area to contra dance. We find a line that is forming and join the row. Before the music starts, Mentor guides the dancers through the moves. This is the part, where new dancers and old learn

the contra before the band starts playing again. Almost every contra has couples dancing in two facing lines. This is known as line dancing and the only exception is when the dance calls for a square.

I join hands with my partner and face up the line to find another smiling couple that join hands with us. This is followed by the caller instructing dancers to move in a circle three places to the left. A common move in contra is to gypsy with your neighbor, which means you must walk around the man or woman who is not your partner, holding eye contact the entire time. This type of move can be slightly uncomfortable at first, especially if the neighbor you are gypsying is a complete stranger. To ensure a comfortable atmosphere, most people smile and make funny faces and compliment your dress attire.

My partner and I return to our original place in the line after a successful walkthrough, and Crowfoot starts up with a lively reel. As usual, the first move is to circle three places to the left, which Mentor calls out across the hall. The hall is once again transformed into a motion of swishing skirts, quick moving feet, and untamed hair. As my partner and I move down the line, I dance with people whose ages span from early teens to late 60s. Line Dancing, which contra is more or less, means you dance with everyone in your line, giving you the chance to potentially dance with everyone in the room before the night is over.

When we get to the end of the line, where the stage is and the band is playing right above our heads, my partner and I stand out of the way, while the other dancers continue to twirl their partners and circle to the left. In contra you move up and down the lines and once you've moved all the way down the line so that you're at the end, you stand out for a few moments until the next couple moves up, taking your place being out. After a few moments waiting on the sidelines, my partner and I are back in the line, making our way down to the other end. Several

minutes later the band winds down, and the contra comes to an end. My partner thanks me with a pat on the shoulder and we clap for Crowfoot.



Belfast Flying Shoes contra dances are put on by a team, and if there is anyone who knows about this best, it's Chrissy Fowler. Fowler, along with Jennifer Armstrong, and Phyllis Buchanan, started the dance in 2005. She began contra dancing in her 20s and helped organize a dance in New Hampshire. I ask Fowler—who is tall and is wearing glasses and whose short, dark hair is speckled with gray—what contra dancing is to her. “It's accessibility—anyone can walk. It has social value, and it's intergenerational,” she says to me at the break. Contra dancing is also her job. Fowler goes all over Maine calling for dances like the one in Belfast, as well as organizing dances in schools and at weddings. Although she is a big part of putting on Belfast's contra dances each month, she assures me that they are a multiple person effort. It takes a caller to correspond with the band and keep dancers in line, an organizer to schedule each dance and find musicians, who are either local or touring the state, and of course dancers, the reason these event happen in the first place.

Fowler tells me that since its start in 2005, the Belfast dancing crowd has expanded. Senior dancers tell me that none of the contra dances in Maine are as big as Belfast's. It's a place where you never know who you might meet. I once danced with a young man who had hiked the Appalachian Trail from Virginia to Maine. Another night I met a college girl from New Mexico. Most nights like tonight, there are 100 people in the hall. There are older couples, who have been coming for years, teenagers that have been dancing since they were toddlers, and parents who are coming with their children.

After attending these dances, you get to know and start recognizing people, who come on a regular basis. Steve Cartwright is one of the regulars at Belfast. He is short with gray hair, and you'll almost always catch him wearing a big smile on his face and a t-shirt celebrating contra. Cartwright is from Waldoboro, and has come to Belfast's dance for six years; he's been dancing for 30. "My dad called contra dances and loved to dance, so I've been around it for a while," says Cartwright, who started, and manages a contra dance on the last Saturday of the month, in the Thomaston Academy gym in Thomaston. "I can't imagine not dancing. And I love the old tunes, played traditionally or changed."



"[Dancing] makes you happy," says Fowler. She couldn't have described tonight's crowded hall any better. Everyone—young, old, and from all walks of life—are smiling and laughing with each other. There are people here who have been dancing for years, and others that are contra dancing for the first time tonight. I danced down a line that had a group of young adults with European accents, who weren't getting the moves right. It was apparent that they hadn't danced before, but when my partner and I got to them, we helped them get back on track.

It doesn't matter if you've been dancing for one night or 30 years; the people here tonight have come because it does something for them. It could be the music that draws them, or simply to meet up with friends. It could be that you've been doing it for years and can't imagine not doing it, or maybe it's just a better way to spend a Friday night. "When I dance, I forget about everything except smiling," says Rachael Allen, a bright-eyed eighteen year old whose daytime job is working as a certified nurse's assistant until she can go to midwifery school. "The reason I love to contra dance is because it gives me a feeling of letting go."

You know you're in the right place when you can look around and see people of all ages with smiling faces and looking utterly carefree. I have never been somewhere where the smiles are brighter, the laughter is louder, and happiness is so strong it can be felt in the room, than at Belfast's contra dance. Perhaps more unique than dancing old style dances and meeting different people, is its ability to create happiness inside and out and make you, as Bob Marley once sang, "forget your troubles and dance."