

Squares - Circles - Sets - Contrás: The Basics

by Marcia McKenzie, ©2009, rev. 2023

A DANCE BY ANY OTHER NAME

The word “dance” conjures up different images for different folks. It’s an activity that precedes history but continues today in many forms serving many functions - as celebration, pure art, prayer, exercise, and, of course, as a means of socializing with one special person or in groups. Animals even dance!

Here I want to focus on one type of dance, but I have always been at a bit of a loss as to what to call it. It tends to serve one purpose primarily (socializing in groups), but it can take a number of different forms - square dances, contra dances, circles and set dances. One could call it “group dance,” but that term is fairly non-descript and could include so many other types of dance, from artistic dance performances, to sacred dance, to line dancing at the local night club. “Folk dance” might be a bit more helpful since this kind of dance is for all folks, and much of it is from the folk tradition. But the term can also conjure up images of men and women in lederhosen or Greek gowns performing ancient dances native to different countries.

“Traditional dance” is perhaps a bit more accurate because, even though many of the dances have been created recently, they do draw on a body of traditional dance figures and are danced as part of a long tradition of folks gathering together to socialize. These dances may be held for private groups - churches, conferences, weddings, parties, even square dance “clubs” - or they may take place in settings open to the public, but in either case they promote a sense of community where new dancers are encouraged to join in. So the term “community dance” also seems to be somewhat apropos.

For lack of a better phrase, I will say that what we are dealing with here are “traditional community dances” that include primarily square dances, contra dances, set dances and circle dances. My aim is to try to explain them to those who may not be very familiar with them or who may wonder what a “contra dance” is when they see one advertised in their community. As a dancer, dance caller and musician for dances, I have some insight into all three perspectives. Note, however, that I in no way claim to be an “authority,” and I would welcome input (corrections, clarifications, etc.) from others who may be more knowledgeable in these areas.

OPEN TO ALL

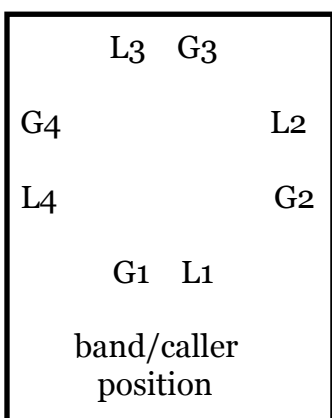
As community dances, whether square dances, contra dances, or a mixture, these are events which encourage participation by all, and newcomers are welcomed. There is certainly a range of experience level, and some long-standing community dance events may have an abundance of very experienced dancers, making it a bit more intimidating (but also fun and exciting!) for newbies. Other dance events may have many more beginners or less-experienced dancers in attendance. In any case, experience is certainly not a requirement since each dance is taught by the caller, with a brief walk-through, before it is danced to music. Often there is an additional workshop for beginners held before the evening of dances so that these folks can become more familiar with the common dance figures.

The other important point to note is that you do not need to come to these events with a partner. In fact, even if you do, chances are you will not dance with them for at least part of the evening. These kinds of dances have always been a way to meet people and make new friends. Though not mandatory, dancing with different partners is common, and some dances are even configured so that you constantly change partners throughout the same dance!

SQUARES

Even those not very familiar with traditional community dances probably have at least some vague notion of what a “square dance” is. Unfortunately, this notion may come from negative memories of having to hold hands with other students in 4th grade gym class while the teacher barked out commands in time with a scratchy recording of very uncool music. Others may be familiar with western square dance clubs, which are still popular in some parts of the country but which involve membership, progressive levels of instruction, and often the wearing of specific attire (none of which is a requirement at traditional community square dances).

As the name implies, squares are danced in square formation. There are 4 couples (8 persons) per group, with each couple forming one side of the square. They all face the center of the square, with partners side-by-side, and each couple has its back to one of the 4 walls of the room (or imaginary room if the dance is held outdoors). Within each couple, the gent (**G**) is on the left and the lady (**L**) is on the right. **NOTE** that while this is the tradition, and many callers still use the terms “gent” and “lady,” these are now viewed simply as *positions* or *roles* rather than genders, and it is becoming increasingly common to use other terms such as “**Lark**” (for the person on the **L**eft) and **Raven** or **Robin** (for the person on the **R**ight). Anyone can assume either role, and there are actually many dances where these roles are identical except for the position of the dancers. In the following diagram I use “ladies” (**L**) and “gents” (**G**) for convenience only.



Each couple has a “home” position where they start, and usually end, the dance and which they often return to at various points in the dance. Some square dances assign each couple a number (1-4), with the 1st couple being the one with their backs to the band/caller, the 2nd to their right, the 3rd across from them, and the 4th to their left. Many of the older dances, called “visiting couple” squares, involve each couple, in turn, performing a series of figures (given colorful names like “Birdie in the Cage” and “Duck for the Oyster”) with each of the other three couples in turn. After one couple has done this, there may be some group figure involving the entire square before the next couple does its “visiting.” Sometimes this group figure may even involve a change of partners.

Another type of square dance involves the terms “head couples” (couples 1 and 3) and “side couples” (couples 2 and 4). Normally the heads will do a series of moves, followed by the sides doing the same moves. This may be repeated once again, and there will probably be some group figures at different points in the dance that may or may not involve a change of partners.

Because all the dancers are not dancing all the time, these two types of squares allow time for socializing with one’s current partner or just doing some freestyle dancing. Over the years, in

deference to dancers who wanted to be moving all the time, squares have been developed which involve all the dancers moving all the time. This is just another fun variant in a very rich tradition.

As with all the community dances I will be describing, these squares are taught before they are danced, and a caller prompts the dancers throughout the dance as needed. (Occasionally, in rural communities with long-standing dance events, those attending have become so familiar with the dances that they require very little or no prompting, but these are not the kinds of events I am describing.) Some squares are timed to the music, with the various moves requiring a specific number of beats and happening at regular intervals. Others fit more loosely so that, while the dancers move (walk, clog, shuffle, bob) in time with the music, it is less crucial that the figures take a specific number of beats, and the caller simply prompts the next move when the dancers are ready. Though less common, some callers will even sing the prompts in what is known as a “singing square.”

Usually there is a live band, and square dance music has traditionally been identified with old-time Southern Appalachian tunes, usually played on the fiddle, banjo, and, now, guitar and bass. There is, of course, no rule that requires this, and western square dance clubs often dance to more modern music, but the shuffley, high-energy old-time tunes lend themselves particularly well to this type of dance. If the dance is timed to the music, the band must usually play an even (AABB, 64-beat) tune. Otherwise, a “crooked” tune or a 3- or 4-part tune will work just fine.

CIRCLES

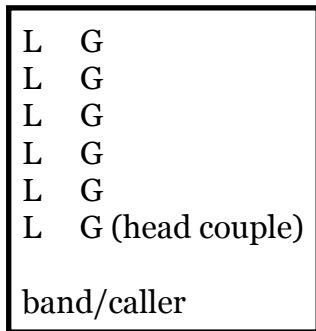
Circle dances date back even earlier than square dances, and usually an evening of community dances will involve at least 1 or 2 circles. The most common type will be circle “mixers,” in which everyone is continually changing partners throughout the dance, doing a series of the same dance figures with each one in turn or with the entire circle. In “Kentucky running set” circle dances, dancers do not change partners but, instead, each couple executes a series of figures with different couples (i.e. in groups of 4).

These latter types of circle dances, when more structured, become “progressive circle” dances, which are like contra dances (described later) except that the two opposing lines have been curved into a circle so there are no ends. Like contra dances, progressive circles are timed to the music and require 64-beat tunes from the band. Circle mixers and Kentucky running sets may or may not be timed to the music. Traditional tunes are common, either Southern Appalachian (the norm at square dances) or New England or Celtic tunes (heard at many contra dances). More on contra dance music later in this article.

SETS

Sometimes referred to as “wholeset longways” dances, these are simpler precursors to today’s contra dances. If you have ever danced the Virginia Reel, you have danced this kind of set. Dancers are arranged in 2 lines facing each other, with each person’s partner in the opposite line, “across the set.” Depending on the dance, there may be an exact number of couples needed, or it may not matter. The couple closest to the band/caller is the “head couple.” A series of figures danced by the entire set alternates with some figures performed or led by just the head couple. At the end of one time through

the dance, the head couple has moved to the bottom (opposite end) of the set, and the couple that was second in line becomes the new head couple. The dance is then repeated.

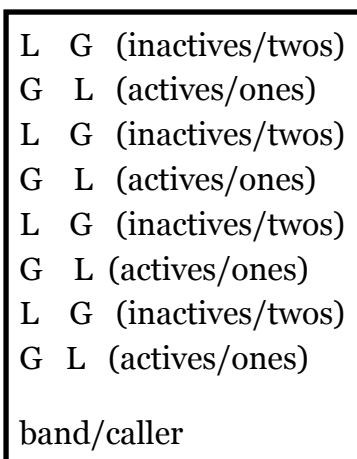


This diagram shows the arrangement for a wholeset longways dance. **NOTE** that, as in the previous diagram, I use “ladies” (**L**) an “gents (**G**) for convenience only. One could easily use “larks” and “robins” or even “cats” and “dogs”! Often terms for separate roles are not even needed at all in set dances, making this dance form very good for children or inexperienced dancers. And, again, some set dances are timed with the music and others are not.

CONTRAS

The term “contra dance” has been posited by some to come from the word “country dance” since the form is similar to many traditional English country dances. The more common belief is that it comes from the French “contre,” meaning “opposed,” since it is danced in two opposing lines as in the set dance.

While the arrangement of the dancers is similar to that for set dances, there are a few important differences. The number of couples in each set is limited only by the length of the dance hall. Instead of there being only one head couple, every other couple is, in effect, a head couple (although in contra dancing they are called “actives” or “ones”). At the beginning of each dance, dancers will line up in 2 lines, with the ladies’ (**L**) line on the caller’s left and the gents’ (**G**) line on the caller’s right (as in set dances, with partners in opposing lines). **NOTE**, again, that I use these traditional terms in the diagram below for convenience only. As explained earlier, anyone can dance either role, and other terms for these roles are becoming increasingly common.



Once lined up, dancers “take hands 4 from the top,” meaning they form circles of 4 (2 couples) all the way down the set, starting at the head (the end closest to the band/caller). This defines the roles of the couples, with the “actives” (“ones”) being the couple in each group of 4 that is closest to (has their backs to) the band, and the “inactives” (“twos”) being the couple in each group that is farthest from (facing) the band. In “proper” contra dances, all the dancers with the same role remain in the same line (as in set dances). For “improper” dances, the actives change places with their partners so that each line alternates, gents and ladies. In each group of 4 dancers, your partner is across the set from you, and your “neighbor” is the person next to you (in the same line). The diagram shows the setup for an improper contra dance.

Contra dances are almost always danced to 64 beat tunes (though there have been several written for tunes of other lengths). The dancers in each group of 4 execute a series of dance figures with each other that take 64 beats total. By the time the tune has been played through one time, the dancers have “progressed” to the other side of their neighbors. Thus, the active couples have moved one space

“down” the set (away from the band/caller), and the inactives have moved one space “up” the set (toward the band/caller). They are now facing new neighbors, and the dance is repeated in new groups of 4.

And what happens when a couple gets to the top or bottom of the set and there are no more neighbors to dance with? They must wait out the dance one time through the tune, at which point there will be another couple coming their way looking for new neighbors. The couple that has been waiting will then reenter the dance, this time going in the opposite direction. This means if they were actives progressing down the set, they will now be inactives progressing up. If they were inactives progressing up the set, they will now be actives progressing down. And if this is an improper contra (as most contra dances are these days), couples must remember to change places with their partners before reentering the dance so that each line will still be alternating gents-ladies (or larks-robins).

Whew! It sounds complicated, but once you’ve done it a few times it becomes second nature. The majority of contra dances are structured the same way (there are Becket dances and double-progression dances that work a little differently). It is mainly the series of figures that changes with each dance, and, as with other community dances, these are taught and practiced a few times before they are danced to music.

Southern Appalachian old-time music works just fine for contra dances as long as the tunes are the right length. However, other styles have become common as well. Besides the traditional old-time instrumentation mentioned above, one often hears piano, whistles, drums, mandolins, and even reed instruments. The more melodic New England, French-Canadian or Irish reels, jigs and marches are commonly heard, along with swing, ragtime and other styles. The main requirement is that the tunes be 64 beats in length and inspiring to dance to! There are many ways in which the dance musicians can make their music fit the particular dance being called and thus drive the dance even more.

I have purposely not described any of the specific dance *figures* associated with traditional community dances. There are too many to include in such a brief article. But, have no fear - they will all be taught and practiced at any dance event you attend. I invite you to give it a try and experience just how joyful and community-building dance can be!