

When I first started going to dances in the Boston area in the late 1970s, the local square and contra dance scene was undergoing a wild growing phase. The big weekly Tuesday night dance run by the CDS Boston center had outgrown the YWCA in Cambridge, and had just recently moved to the Brimmer and May school gym in Chestnut Hill. Tod Whittemore had just started his Thursday night dance at the Cambridge YWCA (this dance then moved to the VFW in West Cambridge within a few years), and Tony Parkes and Donna Hinds were just starting up the weekly Monday night "Yankee Ingenuity" dance at the Concord Scout House.

There were four callers at these three weekly dances, and their names all started with a "T" (this seemed to be a requirement for being a caller in the Boston area at the time) - Ted Sannella, Tony Parkes, Tod Whittemore, and Tony Saletan. All of these callers did both squares and contras as part of their programs, and all except Ted did singing squares. So I was lucky to be exposed to singing squares as a regular part of an evening's dance, and particularly as done by Tod Whittemore, the singing squares were just lots of silly fun.

Tod had learned a lot of his material from attending Duke Miller dances in New Hampshire where his family vacationed in the Summer, and as we all do, he modified some of the material to suit his tastes. So I was exposed to a lot of these old traditional singing squares, and as Tod did them they seem to be a whole lot of fun both to call and to dance. When I started calling some years later, one of my aspirations was to start learning some of this material. Tod was very helpful in getting me started along this route.

Over the next decade or so I collected singing squares from a variety of sources: from dances I went to (and sometimes recorded), from a tape that Jack O'Connor made of the Bradford New Hampshire square dance in 1955, from some old square dance records, and from material I got from other callers, including Tod Whittemore, Tony Parkes, Tony Saletan, Sarah Gregory Smith, Ralph Sweet, Debbie Gray, and Chip Hendrickson. I met Chip at the first Ralph Page Legacy weekend - he had been calling squares since the 1950's, and was gracious enough to give me a copy of his call book from that same period, which was an interesting source of material.

I was also Incredibly fortunate to fall in with Debby Knight, my life companion and a wonderful piano player. I always envision singing squares as having a piano accompaniment, and Debby has proved to be masterful in implementing this.

As I started learning this material, I found that some of it resonated with me, and some of it didn't. I concentrated on the material I liked, shaping it and modifying it to my own sensibilities. Of the 3 dozen or so squares that I learned, only a handful of them are in my current repertoire, and I do another handful of them only occasionally. The rest of them are interesting from an historical perspective, but not really my style.

So what are singing squares anyway? I think of them as square dances done to popular music of the past days (mostly the middle 20th century), driven by words that mostly rhyme and usually include at least a small snippet of the original song. A lot of this material seems to be in our cultural consciousness, and it often sounds reassuringly familiar when we hear it - sometimes prompting dancers to sing along with the chorus. Most singing squares are not very challenging choreographically, and tend to draw dancers into a more social setting.

Mostly though, I think that they are just a whole lot of good silly fun!

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