

Dance Calling: Communicating with the Band

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***My guiding principle: The dancers, the musicians, and I are all there to have fun.
I want to do what I can to facilitate that.***

Dancers want to have fun, and one of our responsibilities as callers is to help them do so, as efficiently and effectively as we can. There are, of course, many things that go into that process.... One factor is how well the dance and music fit together. To get the best fit, you need to communicate with the band.

The first question you might have is, "what do I need to communicate to the band?" I propose that you get in the habit of asking them that question. Different bands are different; they will want different things from you. That said, here's a list of some things they might possibly ask you:

1. What kind of tune(s) would you like for the next dance?
2. Can we see your dance card?
3. Can we play [a certain type of tune] for the next dance?
4. How fast would you like that?
5. [If you're calling a square:] Can we play a crooked tune?
6. Can you please tell us when we're about half way through the dance?
7. How will you tell us when you're going to end the dance?
8. What else do you need from us?

As you might guess from the last question, there is probably information you'll want from the band, too. Different callers are different; you may not need all of the following kinds of information, or you might want to know some things I haven't listed. But here are a few things you might want to ask a band:

1. [As far in advance of the gig as possible:] What kind(s) of tunes do you play? How would you describe your style? Do you have any special tune sets you'd like me to know about?
2. Do you play a range of tempos? [Again, in advance if possible, so that you can plan your program accordingly.]
3. Do you play medleys? Two tunes or three, or more?
4. Who should I talk to about what kinds of tunes I'd like for each dance?
5. How far in advance would you like me to signal the end of the dance?
6. What signal can I use if I need to slow you down or speed you up? Does the whole band need to see it, or is there a designated person for that?
7. What information do you need from me?

So, then, what kind of tune would you like for this square? And how fast would you like it?
A few rules of thumb:

1. Choose a style of tune that matches the style of dance - New England reels or jigs for New England squares, southern tunes for southern (and often for western) squares. How do you know what kind of square it is? Well, if the figures all take 8 beats, and are the kinds of figures you also find in contra dances, chances are pretty good that it's a New England style square. If they're not, it's probably southern or western. Also, if it's a visiting couple square, it's almost certainly a southern square, or at least it's in that style. Most older dances are easy to categorize; some modern compositions are a bit trickier.
2. Think about what kind of music you would enjoy dancing to for this square. Do you want a driving tune, one keeps you moving a little relentlessly? Or perhaps something a bit more relaxing, more melodic? How about something marchy, or smooth? The more you've talked with your band about what kinds of tunes they play, the more adjectives you'll have available to describe their tunes - make use of their words.
3. Don't be afraid to experiment. Sometimes you make wonderful discoveries about dances going with tunes you wouldn't have expected...
4. On the other hand, if you really think southern music is best with a particular square, and the band doesn't play southern music, you may want to choose a different dance.
5. Think about how fast you would enjoy dancing this square - but then, look around the dance floor. Are the dancers significantly older or younger than you are, on average? Are they in better or worse shape than you are? Are they worn out from the last three dances you've called, none of which allowed them a moment's rest? Is it the middle of July in a humid climate? Or is it midwinter and they're itching to go? The pace of each dance should fit the dance, but it should also be appropriate for the crowd at that moment in time.