

Dance at the Laurel Theatre – 1996: The Tradition Continues

Contra to Popular Belief

Though explained over the phone as “a less rigid, more individualized form of square dancing.” I still had visions of Sandinistas and machine guns prancing in my head when I walked through the door of the Laurel Theatre at 16th and Laurel. But after an hour, I realized that I’d stumbled onto something even more exciting than a date with David Duchovny.

Uncomfortable in social situations? Contra dancing’s the answer. Hate to exercise? Contra dancing renders aerobics painless. Can’t dance to save your life? NOBODY CARES! Contra dancing could even be the answer to world peace! There’s no way those Jews and Palestinians could stay mad at each other while contra dancing.

After an evening of contra dancing, I was ready to toss out my antidepressants and put my therapist on notice.

Unlike structured, one-on-one dancing, in contra dancing I danced with everyone, men and women alike, as the band played music that sounded like an Irish jig. Our band known as the Illegal Contra Band, featured a flute, a guitar, a hammered dulcimer, and a mandolin. Jim Turner, treasurer of the Knoxville Country Dancers, explained, “Nobody is gonna teach you to dance, everybody will teach you to dance.” There were no rules, no stigma, and no one seemed to care if I was an expert or a beginner. If you can count to eight, know your left hand from your right, and don’t fall down or throw up when you get a little dizzy you can do the contra.

Specific moves were orchestrated by a caller, similar to those in square dancing, but the contra was looser and less restrictive. Dancers formed two lines and begin the dance facing each other. The caller then told the dancers what moves to make. Some of the more routine moves are: the allemand — grasping a partner’s hand in a pseudo high-five and walking in a circle; the do-si-do — walking around someone as they walk around you; the star — taking the person’s hand across from you diagonally and walking in a circle with three other people; and my personal favorite, the gypsy — walking in a circle with your partner and undressing him with your eyes. Donna McAllister, long time contra dancer, says contra offers everyone the chance to do some major flirting. I certainly did.

Contra is an equal-opportunity dance. There are no wallflowers, no condescending looks, no dress codes, and no pecking orders. The contra is low-stress, no-pressure dancing — the cure for dancephobics everywhere. I might even go back.

Val Pendergrast, “Dance, Dance, Dance”, *Metro Pulse* (vol. 6, no. 33), August 15–22, 1996