

Your First Contra Dance

Rob Conboy, Aug 2019

Contra dancing is a casual, join-the-fun kind of folk dancing that brings people together from all generations and levels of dance experience. Many come alone, so there is no need to bring a partner. It takes about fifteen minutes to learn enough to get started. Contra is often compared to square dancing, as both are led by a caller who prompts different parts of the dance, such as “Do-si-do your partner”. Contra also resembles the English dancing depicted in Jane Austen stories, but it’s a modern, more energetic American version. The term means “opposites dance”.

For your very first dance it’s best to arrive half-an-hour before it begins as many dances schedule an introductory lesson during this time. Time constraints and the need to avoid information overload limit this lesson to little more than how to connect with other dancers and move in time to the music. The lesson will also explain a few of the specific movements, called figures, that you will be doing. You might remember a few from elementary school square dancing. If there is no intro lesson, then the early selection of dances will be designed like one. Led by the caller, a dance is a repeating sequence of figures that bring partners to visit other couples in a progressive pattern. The caller teaches each dance and has everyone walk through it just before the music starts. While dancing, the caller prompts each figure as it comes up. Prompting continues for as long as needed. Having fun matters more than getting it right, but as you get better it becomes even more fun.

You may naturally feel inclined to dance with those you came with, but a key to success is to first partner with someone who has more experience. You’ll have much more fun dancing together once you get the hang of it. Early in the evening, dancers often seek to partner with someone who’s new, and people change partners after every dance. There are no romantic connotations. You can ask anyone to dance, and it’s perfectly okay to decline anyone who asks you.

Dress casually, and your shoes should have clean soles, as any embedded pebbles or grit could damage the dance floor. It’s just as important that your shoes are comfortable: gym sneakers are fine; high heels are not recommended. Most experienced dancers bring flats they’ve dedicated for dancing and change into them upon arriving. Contra dancing is light exercise. Comfortable, loose-fitting clothing is best even on a winter night. A light summer dress may help keep you cool. It’s a good idea to bring an extra fresh shirt or two if you tend to sweat. Shorts are good in the warmer months, and short sleeves are appropriate all year. Moisture wicking shirts stay dry longer than cotton. Most dancers bring a water bottle, too. Many dances have a policy of no perfumes or scented products for the benefit of dancers who are allergic or sensitive to them.

The hope is that newcomers will enjoy it enough to be motivated to come back. You shouldn’t worry about ruining it for the better dancers; they want to dance with you. You may find some of the best dancers to be the most welcoming, because it’s rewarding to witness and assist in another’s discovering the joy of dance. To find your local dances, two resources are the dance map at <https://www.cdss.org> and listings broken down by region and state at <http://contradancelinks.com>. These sites have schedules and information for countless dances. There may be several in your area to choose from.

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