

Halifax group dancing up a storm

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People attend a contra dance event at St. Antonio's Church Hall in Halifax in May. (ADRIEN VECZAN / Staff)

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Fiddle tunes, fast spins, and "do-si-dos" are prominent in contra dancing. (ADRIEN VECZAN / Staff)

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Contra dancing has its roots in English country dancing and French quadrilles (or squares). (ADRIEN VECZAN / Staff)

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Traditional square and circle dancing are cousins to contra dancing. (ADRIEN VECZAN / Staff)

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The popularity of contra dancing in Halifax has grown in recent years. (ADRIEN VECZAN / Staff)

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The two Halifax contra groups joined forces to bid for a stop on the Country Dance and Song Society's North American Centennial Tour. (ADRIEN VECZAN/Staff)

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A Contra Fest is scheduled for Sept. 27 to Oct. 3, with events in Halifax, the Annapolis Valley, and on the South Shore. (ADRIEN VECZAN / Staff)

Nova Scotians have been dancing in circles, squares, and kitchens for generations, but more and more you'll find them lining up at local contra dances. Fiddle tunes, fast spins, "do-si-dos," and a healthy dose of sweat and laughter make up the contra repertoire. No dancing experience required — under the guidance of a caller instructing you and your partner's every move, it literally won't take you long to get into the swing of things.

"Anyone can contra dance. People need to be able to stand on their own two feet ... and knowing your left from your right is helpful, too," jokes Kat Kitching, who is one of the organizers of the Halifax Contra Dances.

Contra dancing, a cousin to traditional square and circle dancing, distinguishes itself by long line formations and one especially popular ingredient, lots of swinging. In no time, you've gone forward-and-back, swung with your neighbour, and made friends with your partner (and everyone else down the line).

Before becoming popular in Nova Scotia, contra can trace its dance steps back to English country dancing and French quadrilles (or squares). The European settlers of the 1800s and 1900s brought with them to North America a culture of social dancing which still today remains popular in New England and the Maritimes.

"Contra dancing tends to use traditional jigs and reels. I think that that's one of the things that makes it attractive to Nova Scotians because that kind of music is part of the Nova Scotia heritage," says Dottie Welch, originally from New England, but now a seasoned and devoted member of Nova Scotia's traditional dance community.

"I think I was born into it. My parents were contra dancers with a very famous contra caller in New England and I have very early memories of traditional square dancing and contra dancing." She recalls skiing the Appalachians with family during the day and square and contra dancing at night. These social dances were always a great way to connect people and create community, so in 1973 when Dottie and husband Garry Welch made the move to Nova Scotia, dancing was a natural way to integrate into their new community.

Forty years later, Dottie is still dancing and calling as well as leading the Contra Time Dancers.

This group and the Halifax Contra Dances make up today's contra dance scene in Halifax, one that has become popular over the past few years, thanks in part to the Smokin' Contra Band. The band was brought together in 2007 by fiddler Amy Louder and included flutist and guitarist Ben Sichel, mandolin player Dave Ron, and drummer Jason Dionne. The group loved the tunes and wanted to build a larger contra community in Halifax.

They did just that. The band's first dance saw about 30 dancers circle down the floor and over the next four years that modest crowd grew to about 120 at the monthly dances. In 2011, the Smokin' Contra Band handed over the musical reins to a group of community volunteers who formed Halifax Contra Dances and kept up the monthly dance tradition. The dances are still a big draw for many reasons.

"It's a great way to meet people. I love that intimacy with strangers that cements a sense of community," says musician and contra dancer Erin Dempsey. A traditional Irish flutist, Erin performed at a dance in 2011 and recalls how "it was an amazing experience to look around and see everyone look so happy. Everyone was dancing."

After spending the last six years in Ireland developing her musical career, she recently returned to Halifax and happily found herself on the contra dance floor following up on the recommendation of one of her students.

She's not alone in embracing contra culture. Daniel Gagnon travelled all the way from Gatineau, Que., to attend the last Halifax Contra Dance of the season this past May. He was first introduced to traditional dancing three years ago in Quebec and dove in feet first. "I heard people talking about contra dancing in Ottawa and I started and just fell in love with it. Now I travel to Montreal, Toronto, the States and now Halifax to do contra dancing. It's always interesting to see who you are going to meet. It's just so much fun. I'm hooked (on) it."

With plenty of enthusiasm and an established contra community, Halifax's two contra groups recently teamed up to place a bid to host one of the seven stops on the Country Dance and Song Society's North American Centennial Tour. The U.S.-based society is the leading organization supporting traditional dancing in North America, and last fall shared the good news with the Halifax groups that they had won a stop on the tour. Ever since, volunteers have been

hard at work planning the tour stop that will see the finest contra dancers, callers, and musicians share their expertise with Nova Scotians.

The week-long Contra Fest will provide a cross-pollination of contra skills between the American staff and Nova Scotian participants. “The goal is to have a long-term impact on the growth of contra in Nova Scotia” says Kitching. Festival events will take place in 2015 from Sept. 27 to Oct. 3 in Halifax, the Valley and South Shore.

The week will include dances, caller and musician workshops, as well as community, university, and high-school dances every day of the week, with major dances on Sunday, Sept. 27, and Saturday, Oct. 3.

A welcoming environment for even the greenest of dancers, you’re invited to attend the Contra Fest events and encouraged to try your hand (and feet) at this dizzyingly fun social dance. You may find yourself connecting with a long line of traditional dance, one that may keep you swinging back for more.

Line up with Halifax’s two contra dance groups.

- [Halifax Contra Dances](#) 2014 monthly dances: Sept. 20, Oct. 11, Nov. 15, Dec. 6, 7:30-11 p.m. \$10 or pay what you can. All Nations Church, 2535 Robie St., Halifax.
- [Contra Time Dancers](#) 2014 monthly dances: Sept. 27, Nov. 1, Nov. 29, 8-10:30 p.m., \$10. Evangelical Lutheran Church, 2096 Windsor St., Halifax

Nova Scotia Contra Fest 2015

- Find more information on the country dance and song society tour [here](#).
- Check out details of the Nova Scotia Contra Fest 2015 at [Contrafest.ca](#) or on Facebook
- If you’d like to volunteer with the Halifax contra dance groups or help with Contra Fest celebrations, email Kat at halifaxcontradances@gmail.com or Dottie at dwelch@eastlink.ca.

About the Author
