

Chris Pinkham

P.O.B. 1419 Hillsboro NH. 03244

e-mail: cp_info@mcttelecom.com

Non Dancer Parties and Dance Party Choreo.

About 60% of my calling business is spent not calling squares, but calling for non dancer parties or to folks that have had a very limited experience with folk and square dancing. I do have a problem with the concept of the “non” dancer in that we would have to search high and low for anyone who has not danced to or at least moved a little to music. When programming a dance for non-dancers and considering choreography for dance parties, least is best when combined with a few simple direct terms.

When I get the call for a dance party whether it’s a new event or a repeat, I always look at this as an opportunity for a great evening of fun for them and me. When I first started coming to CALLERLAB in 1995, I found myself drawn to the Community, Folk and beginner party people. These folks turned out to be the people that helped me find that something extra that I was looking for when I was calling for non-dancer groups. At the time I was just using squares for my dance parties and wanted something else to vary my programs. Through CALLERLAB, I found new friends, material and a fast change in my program and a whole different way to present a non dancer party.

For a number of years I have presented a mixed folk, square and general dance party. I got to a point where I no longer wanted to be just a square dance caller. With some simple changes in format, I went from simple squares for the night to a varied program leading, not teaching the dancers in the square first, then taking simple choreography shown in those squares and creating an easy transition to basic contras, triples, Sicilian circles, and Mescolanzas. When I began to add a mix of non-folk, and party style dances, I knew that I had the variety to

create a dance party that could cover any age group and energy level. A number of the dances that I work with can be sourced from a great book titled, "Dancing for Busy People" by Cal Cambell, Bob Howell and Ken Kernen. This compilation of dances has been an excellent reference over the years and contains an absolute wealth of dance forms and instruction for the dance leaders. For those like me who have a challenged memory, this book can be your fallback, giving you a step by step method for learning and developing your ability to manage a dance program other than squares. The book is a start point, also look into other Callerlab references, committees, and the Beginner Party Leadership weekend.

The following dances and their progression through an event are a part of my repertoire that I've adapted to my personality and musical choices. This is the point where you need to find the music you're comfortable with, as well as the dance types (easily researched) that you and your personality can manage. I come from an athletic background so my events lean toward high energy. That being said, I am always aware of when to tone down based on the fabric (demographics) of my dancers for the night.

The Non-Dancer Party and Dance Party Choreography

1. Start with little circles, not the big circle. Always a matter of opinion, but I've never been a fan of the big circle. The square dance feel just isn't there and the big circle moves in direct relationship to how many people are in the big circle. I want a high energy event, so I always side step the slow moving big circle and go right to four couple circles. From here, this allows me to arrange partners properly and to explain on the fly the importance of hand holds, partner/corner relationship, and moving to the music. I also have smaller controllable groups that are quickly rearranged in proper squares. From small circles I don't have to take a big circle apart to create squares as they're almost there. It's a time saver and there's more energy in four couple circles because reaction time is quicker. One thing that I talk about but do not fully expect is for dancers to worry about timing and moving to the music at the start. Later in the evening, I will do a few dances in which timing is more important and makes the dance. At that point, my

non- dancers have had some experience with moving to the music and timing comes easier.

2. Squares are next. Those four couple circles only last for a moment or two before I arrange squares by modeling a few sets around the floor – then have all duplicate what we’ve done. The use of a wireless headset mike makes this easy as I can arrange squares by hand, make corrections on the fly and get to folks who might be having minor problems without interrupting the flow on the floor. Squares allow me to demo the choreography that I will use for the evening when we move to different dance forms. I usually limit (depending on the demographics of the group) the number of calls to about eight. While this doesn’t sound like many, picking just the basics gives me more dance forms than I have fingers and gives me an entire evening of dance.
3. The calls used: Circles – Forward & Back – Stars – Do Si Do – U Turn Back – Grand Right & Left – Left and Right arm turns and Pass Thru. With minor modifications shown, not taught, in the first fifteen minutes of the party we now have enough dance material for the whole night without returning to squares, although, I will come back to squares to close out the evening. To break from the square session, I keep a couple of versions of the Polka Based Chicken Dance on hand. Yeah it’s a silly dance, but it’s a no teach that even non dancers recognize giving them another chance to cut loose.
4. From Squares to No Reels: The basics demonstrated from the square session can now be used for several dance forms. At this point people have learned to move to the music. We’ve learned those basic calls for the evening so it’s time to take those calls and move on to other dance forms. The cool thing here is that I don’t have to demo any more calls to move on. At most, I explain some “concepts”. One of my favorites is the Virginia No Reel. This is a quick to learn, “proper” contra that does not exchange partners making it an excellent choice for father / daughter and the non-dancer events. Simple arm turns, the do si do and some quick modifications create an energetic and fun dance. The true Virginia Reel may have been George Washington’s favorite, but this is the “short” form and when partnered with some modern music, this is usually one of the high points of

the night and I'm often asked to do this one again. Having seen experienced callers try to explain the "Reel" in the true Virginia Reel to first timers and failed, the advice is simple: keep it simple and keep them moving without long winded explanations. Successful dancers will remember your style and inclusiveness. I like to pair this simple contra that does not require partner changes with the Tunnel Contra because of its similar steps.

5. From Contras to Triples: Triples are fun and funny. It is an opportunity to get folks away from their partners and go different. The triple is a line of three facing another line of three in wagon wheel formation around the floor or in back to back lines up and down the floor. These triple lines can be any combo of guys or gals it does not matter as there are no partners or partner changes. I'll usually ask that the best lookers stay in the middle and the smartest ones act as ends. If you find yourself with an extra group of three when you've set up the floor, that's no problem. It's very easy to show the extra couple how to "wait their turn" contra style – after 64 beats, someone will be there to dance with them. One of my favorites is "Do Si Dizzy" as its choreo is simple (do si dos and circles) and works for adults and kids equally well. For some reason (maybe it's simple fun and success), cheers always erupt when people "dance through" to a new group of three with this so simple progression. Once you get the hang of these, they can be hashed with simple calls that we've already demonstrated. I'll pair two triples before breaking again as rearranging the floor for something else uses too much time.
6. For non-dancer parties as a break, I will also use some of those oldies that all seem to know regardless of age or experience. The Bunny Hop (I have a great didgeridoo version), and The Hokey Pokey (you can't go wrong here) are great fall backs or diversions from folk dances. Yeah, again they are kind of silly, but by this time, anyone who is still self-conscious at one of my events is now an anomaly. There are plenty of dance forms that work well for non-dancer parties using simple limited or no choreography steps that are closely related to square and folk dancing. These are easily integrated into caller's non-dancer events. These are fun and comfortable for people to do without a lot of thinking involved. I have always preferred simple

presentations with varied dance forms over complex – I want people to dance maximally and think minimally. Easily done with 7 basics and a few moves discussed on the fly. Remember, I always wear a wireless headset from time to time I'll toss in a quick line dance even though I'm not a big fan in general. My personal choice is the "Macarena" because of its simplicity and a near lack of footwork. Picking a child from the group to lead this easy dance to those who were traveling out of our galaxy when this dance came out is enormous fun for the child and only adds to the fun quotient. Be bold with your customers – ask who was travelling out of the galaxy when this dance came out! Don't forget, you're an entertainer and a dance leader – the two go hand in hand.

7. From something familiar to something called Sicilian Circles: Are they from the boot of Italy or somewhere else? Sicilian Circles are likened to mini squares – Normal couples facing normal couples (this "normal" arrangement doesn't matter for non-dancer parties as there are always more of one sex than the other at these event) back to back wagon wheel style around the floor. I used to set these up by directing couples around the floor until I had the right setup – it was more work than I needed and kind of like herding cats until I reread a my copy of The Country Dance Book by Bev Tolman and Ralph Page published in 1937. These are positively easy to set up by taking a partner in hand, walking the floor in a circle and having the other couples fall in behind you until you have led them into a "wheel" on the floor. Why didn't I think of this before? Same results for triples as well. At this point, have every other couple turn around. That was supposed to be funny. Actually designate which couple turns first, then, have every other couple turn around. Sicilian Circles can be hashed, but there are well defined and choreographed Circles available in "Dancing for Busy People". These are simple dances with a nice feel and again using no more than those eight basics described. If I have time, I'll take one from the book and make the other up on the fly. Watch your timing!
8. Is a Kiwi Ring fruit or a bird?: Actually the Kiwi Ring is a beautiful and simple dance that hits all the timing marks combined with a nice piece of traditional sounding music. It's a circle dance that uses only three basics

with some very simple add on concepts. This one takes about a two minute teach and is an excellent crowd pleaser. I always make sure I have a partner for this dance so that I get to dance too. Again, one of the great benefits of calling with a wireless headset.

9. OXO Reel: Is it hugs and kisses or a dance? If the night is going well, I'll use this dance still using those simple basics. It has a beautiful flow to it: Six people facing partners create stars and circles as they track their positions through the set. A little more dancer responsibility is required here but the results are some happy faces. Another interesting and easy set up is the Mescolanza. Basically two couple lines facing two couple lines arranged like loaves of bread up and down the hallway. Dancers move up and down the hall as with most folk/contra style dances but the feel is different from the other dances we have used through the evening. Refer again to "Dancing for Busy People". If you don't have it, order it from Palomino Records.
10. Tooty Ta: Something for the kids or the adult's or maybe for the kid in all of us. This dance came to us from one of our presenters at the BPLS several years ago. Intended for children, I've used this one for mixed child/adult groups with a lot of laughs. With nothing but more serious than a side-close-side move with some imitated gestures, this one has become a staple.
11. The Limbo: When you have lots of kids, adults with cameras, some knee pads, a broom stick and Chubby Checker you have one of the easiest entertainment sessions with the smallest amount of work. Great way to close out a family evening, a campground event or wherever the dress is casual or less.
12. Twist the night away: When you want a little organized chaos at the end of the night and upright is best, try any of Chubby Checker's Twists. Everyone knows how to do this with barely an introduction from you.
13. Conga Lines: To begin or end? If you want to start your night with the big circle, a conga line at the start of the night drives everyone into a big circle without a lot from you other than some basics direction like, "boys, put your partner in front of you and jump on the line". Start them in a counterclockwise direction and your work is done; to music, without hassles. If you have a high energy group, close the evening with a conga line

to head out the door or wherever. Pick a lead couple and tell them to pick a route and the rest is a no teaching dance where the choreography is imitated by the followers.

14. Or is it back to Squares? By reading your crowd, its attitude etc. this may be an evening to close out with a final square dance. My initial conversation with the person that booked me is only an indicator as to how I'm going to run my program for the evening. A final square dance for many is a tasteful way to end an evening. Folks have been using those eight basics throughout the evening. The benefit here is that we've come back to something that is familiar to them. They're flowing well together and the feeling of fun, energy and accomplishment are strong. I like this ending for an adult, couples (still no sex implied) event where a little smoothness and some leftover energy meet face to face.

15. Yeah, we're square dance callers, but there are other ways to market your abilities. When I get a call for a square dance, and this is usually the term people will use because they don't know what else to call them, I will steer them away from the concept of the square dance and lead them toward the dance party. With a rundown of an evening's program, the dance party becomes an easy sale. People come looking for a square dance caller and end up hiring a travelling dance party master, a recreational dance leader – call yourself whatever you like.

Once you get used to using folk and contra style dancing to your program; once you start using a mix of party dances; once the sex arrangement becomes less important, you will find yourself becoming more inventive – only part of the time will you get that perfect night with just the right number of normal couples to handle any dance form you may want them to experience. The non-dancer party seems to hit the spectrum of demographics, so a successful non dancer party hinges on your ability to teach as little as possible, demonstrate where needed, maintain your sense of humor, and always have a fall back plan including dances that are as inclusive as you can possibly make them. If you're a strict constructionist, i.e. squares only at your dance parties, maybe it's time to branch out a little and add some variety to your events. If you're new to dance parties this is a

great time to start creating a simple program of dances that will have your “non-dancers” feeling like Fred & Ginger.

Just a word about your use of corded microphones! STOP!! This form of dance party requires a little more “hands on” than calling a square dance from the stage. I use a wireless for open dances and my dance parties. As a matter of fact, I’ve always used a wireless headset, a tool that gives me complete freedom to demo, dance and participate more completely in the evening. With the wireless, I spend the night on the floor with my dancers, not watching them from the stage.

I’d have to say that leading non-dancer parties has become my favorite venue. I get to call to fresh faces; I get to entertain; I get to dance – sometimes I wonder – who is having more fun? The non-dancer party, accompanied by a very basic choreography list, provides folks with an evening that can have total variety with minimal teaching (I’d rather “demo” the calls from the floor), minimal thinking on the dancer’s part, and maximal fun for someone who showed up thinking this was something they might not be able to do. A program like the one that I’ve developed for my style and personality assures my customers that there will be something for everyone. It also steers people in a different direction when they come in with preconceived notions about square and folk dancing. If you’re a squares only caller, think about adapting what you know to what else is possible. Your street “creds” with your customers and future customers will definitely go up in value with no market drops!