

Magic in the Dance Hall

From the moment I first stepped into the dance hall I was enchanted. I loved the music and was delighted to find the dancing came easily to me. It quickly became apparent, though, that this wasn't simply a fun way to pass an evening. I felt something inside had changed and knew that this place and experience would alter who I was and how I saw the world.

I'm not especially surprised to find that very often people talk about their first encounter with traditional music and dance as being magical. Magic, for me, is simply another way to describe transformation. In fairy tales the toad becomes a prince, and in a staged show the magician's assistant is transported from a box to a tiger cage. Maybe the first passes the limitations of what we're willing to believe. The second is an illusion where we could figure out the trick given enough time and the proper perspective. But spend enough time in a dance hall and witness how it transforms the folks who frequent it, and you can't help but become a believer in *real* magic.

Over the course of an evening, work-weary dancers discover a lightness and enthusiasm they didn't know they possessed. New dancers arrive clumsy and confused and we see that gradually their bodies take on grace and confidence. The news on the car radio on the drive to the hall may have been the worst ever, and yet musicians never fail to pull joy and energy from their instruments. The callers shape the evening; cajoling, encouraging, singing us into moving and playing as one. Well, dang, if that ain't magic, I don't know what is.

For many musicians the open band is at the heart of their transformation within the traditional music and dance community. Many of us had our first experiences playing for dances in our community band, SPUDS. We were welcomed by experienced musicians and honed our developing musical skills in a safe and fun environment. Just as dancers are drawn onto the dance floor by the more experienced dancers, musicians often find their new musical home through the open bands.

They are encouraged by another musician to give playing a try and, once there, find themselves under the spell of the dance. Just like the clumsy dancer who learns to move with ease, the new musician often stumbles a bit in learning the skills needed for playing for dancers. The open band becomes a safety net with more experienced musicians acting as both guides and steadying framework. Some folks play quite happily in the open band for years, others branch out with their own, smaller, bands or other projects. The open band becomes a springboard for learning new styles of music, trying new instruments or, as is evidenced by this book, musical composition.

And as incredible as a good evening at the dance can be, I believe the greater magic comes in what we take away from the hall and carry into the rest of the world. Every evening spent in learning to dance and play together in the dance hall can empower us to move through the rest of our lives with more grace, confidence and light. Just as we learn to communicate with one another through music and dance, we can better learn how to connect creatively in all parts of our lives. I've watched shy, even awkward, bandmates blossom into active community members who encourage other new musicians. Folks who never thought they could write music, are suddenly turning out tunes. I am constantly in awe of just how much creativity one group can generate. What sends me right over the top is imagining how many other dances like ours exist in the world. And not just dances, but think of all the jams, community theaters, scout troops, jazz clubs, poetry readings, 4H Clubs, art galleries and any place where people gather to share in creative connection. And every time humans connect creatively, there is a moment where they are transformed for the better. Wonderful, everyday, anyone-can-do-it magic.

All of the contributors to this book have played at some point in time with SPUDS, the Philadelphia area contra dance open band. While there's no doubt in my mind that much of this material represents the "best of the best", more importantly it is a picture of the best of who we are right now. The artistic snapshot may look different in ten or twenty or a hundred years, but these are the stories, drawings and tunes that represent our collective creativity in this moment. As long as we continue to come together to experience the transformative power of music, dance, art and poetry, then we can believe in magic.

This book is dedicated to the magicians of the dance hall – all of you.

Sarah Gowan
January 2008

A Pre-History of SPUDS

*An interview of Dann Neubauer, former SPUDS fiddler*¹

By Kim Neubauer, current SPUDS fiddler

The evolution of the Philadelphia area's vibrant contra dance community began in the early 70's, long before SPUDS was born and named. The impetus for change came when English Country Dance leader, Hanny Budnick, encountered a problem: Her record collection was not complete enough for some of the tunes she wanted to use. So Hanny recruited musicians from among her dancers.

Dann Neubauer, fiddler, joined four others to practice and perform a few tunes each week: Julia Tilson played accordion and piano, Pat Disque and Liz Snowdon played recorders, and Jim Gregory played hammer dulcimer. Later the group would name itself *The Fine Companions* and would become the house band that played weekly for all the dances.

The dance repertoire expanded to include contra dancing. Lane Neubauer introduced square dancing to the group, often with the amazing piano music of Mark Schwartz, Lane's husband. Initially Lane or other popular International House square dance callers, e.g. John Krumm would lead for an entire evening. In the mid-70's, the contra dancers along with the live musicians split entirely from the English country dancers and integrated a few square dances into a primarily contra dance program led by in-house callers.

The group moved from Germantown Friends School to the Water Tower and to St. Martins in the Field Church. When the group grew out of those sites, they held their dances at Summit Presbyterian Church.

Jim Gregory moved away. Enid Diamante, fiddler, and Jim Couza, hammer dulcimer, joined *The Fine Companions*. Later Jim Couza pursued a career performing at festivals and elsewhere in the UK; he has made sev-

¹ Many details were validated or added by others I spoke to after interviewing my father. On some parts of the story, especially the order of or reason for the moves or the split with the English Country dancers, none of my five or so sources was clear on their recollections.

eral recordings. Other musicians who were welcomed to play with *The Fine Companions* or just at the square dances, were Dave Miller, Bob Stein, Wes Steenson, Peter Lawrence, Bob Pasquarello, Carol Sandler, Vince Massarelli (who carried his bass fiddle in his Volkswagon bug) and Robin and Kevin Lohse, who met while playing music for the dances, and married.

During these years, the group as a whole improved dramatically, and they began to demand more variety with callers and bands. Dancers regularly traveled to NEFFA (New England Folk Festival Association) where they had loads of fun and were introduced to professional callers and bands that they would subsequently invite for the Philadelphia dances.

Over time, *The Fine Companions* became an occasional band, taking infrequent turns in the shadow of well-known out-of-town contra dance bands. The dance group established itself as an organization with structure and officers and the idea to form a pick-up band. SPUDS harnessed the energy of the dozens of talented local musicians who wanted to play for dances and *The Fine Companions* were absorbed into this larger open band.

A History of SPUDS

by *Enid Diamante*

In the late 1980's members of the Thursday night dance decided to organize a group of pick-up musicians to play regularly for the contra dances held at the Summit Presbyterian Church in the Mount Airy section of Philadelphia. David Wilkins became the coordinator and Lucille Reilly the leader for our first gig. Musicians included Bob Stein, Bruce Hooper, Carol Sandler, Dann Neubauer, David Wilkins, Enid Diamante, Heidi Hammel, and Lucille Reilly. I remember the first night we played and wondered what kind of reception we would have. The energetic Lucille Reilly kicked up a storm leading and playing. It wasn't long before the rest of us lost any shyness we might have had and had a ball. When I looked across the dance floor, folks waved, clapped, and cheered us on.

Eventually, the band took on the acronym SPUDS for the Summit Pick Up Dance Society. Gradually, more and more people became interested in playing with SPUDS. Many were contra dancers and others heard about it by word of mouth. SPUDS drew folks from a multitude of backgrounds. Some were classically trained, others were folkies, some had years of experience, others were beginners, a few professionals have joined us on stage, we've had guests from around the country and overseas. The important thing is that all were made to feel welcome.

When I was in second or third grade, a harpist performed for a school assembly program. I was amazed and thought the sounds that emerged from were the most beautiful of anything I had ever heard. Unfortunately, I couldn't persuade my parents to let me take harp lessons. A couple of years later, my family went to the Scottish games in Altamont, NY. The thing that stood out the most was all the bagpipes – too many to count. Band after band marched around the fair grounds playing Scottish and Irish tunes. Alas, I was disappointed again. My parents were not at all interested in having me learn the bagpipe. Then one day I brought home a notice that violin lessons would be offered at my school and my mother signed me up.

For a couple of years I practiced because I felt obligated. The problem was I was never that interested in playing classical music. I played in the local orchestra on and off throughout my teens and twenties. But something magical happened in the late 1970's when I was given a guest pass to a festival called Fox Hollow on the Vermont-New York border. I was spellbound by fiddle music and realized that this was the music I had been yearning to play. I was hooked and never looked back.

Enough of the diversion. Luckily, many local master musicians served as mentors to this budding group. Among them were John Krumm, Bob Stein, Lucille Reilly, Bob Pasquarello, and Mark Simos. They shared their knowledge,

expertise, and enthusiasm gladly and eagerly. I remember an afternoon in the early days of SPUDS when John K. was leading a rehearsal at Bob Stein's apartment and he shared a vision with us. He predicted that eventually small groups of people within SPUDS would form satellite groups that would play for area dances. How true his words proved! Many wonderful bands in the area got their training wheels with SPUDS.

As folks gained experience and confidence, musicians from within the band volunteered or were recruited to be the "fearless leaders." It took a long time for me to agree to lead SPUDS and when I finally did, I couldn't sleep for three nights prior to the dance. When the time came, I stood up on stage with my nerves rattled. But something magical happened as I began leading. People followed my directions!!! My bashfulness evaporated, I smiled and laughed and had the time of my life.

SPUDS is a fluid and unpredictable group. You never know on a given night who may show up. There could be anywhere from a handful to over thirty musicians spilling off the stage. We've been blessed to have the likes of Bob McQuillen and Eugene O'Donnell play with us. Bob McQuillen, a fixture of the New England music and dance scene, received the National Heritage Endowment for the Arts, the highest award for traditional and folk arts in The United States. Eugene O'Donnell was born in Derry, Ireland, lived in Philadelphia for a number of years, and was a master of slow airs and set dances. A high point for many of us was performing at NEFFA, the New England Folk Festival in Natick, Massachusetts.

As far as I'm concerned, SPUDS is one of the best places anywhere for musicians to share ideas, musical styles and interpretations, tunes, and friendship. SPUDS remains a vibrant community that continues to get stronger and better. Countless individuals have added their talents, energy, and love for music to our organization. Close friendships have formed, couples have met and wed, and many wonderful bands have spawned from the big band.

It's impossible to name all the people who have left their mark, so I'll mention just a few. My predecessors, David Wilkins, Carol Compton, and Jansen Wendell, pioneered and strengthened the role of SPUDS in providing and sharing musical outlets for the growing number of traditional musicians in the area. In the early 1990's, Jansen Wendell compiled a book of original tunes by SPUDS musicians into a book titled *Hot Potatoes*. Sue Anderson has maintained our website for more years than I can remember. In the days before the Internet became such a valuable tool in the daily lives of ordinary people including musicians, Jo Anne Rocke used her beautiful penmanship to make available master copies of tunes into a clear, legible format. Nowadays, Sarah Gowan posts the tunes on our website making our repertoire accessible to anyone and everyone with a click of the mouse. The new edition of SPUDS original tunes is now available thanks to Sarah's drive and enthusiasm.

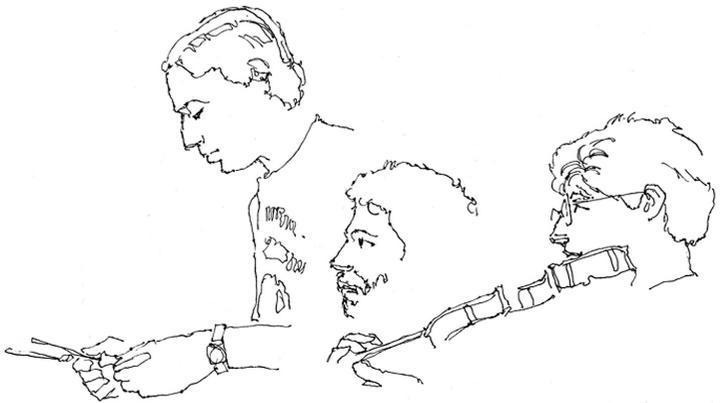
Finally, I'd like to thank all the wonderful and talented folks who have graced SPUDS with their presence at gigs, festivals, rehearsals, jams/potlucks, and parties. May SPUDS continue to grow and become even better for the unforeseeable future. Please visit us at www.thursdaycontra.com/~spuds/ and you are always welcome to join in on the fun when we're playing at us The Glenside Memorial Hall in Glenside, PA.

Recollections

It took me a long time to discover SPUDS. I lived in the Philadelphia area for twelve years before I knew that it existed. I learned about the band from Lucille Reilly, who was invited to my school by the music teacher. To be honest, I was annoyed when I learned that Lucille was playing at an assembly. I didn't understand why the school would pay someone from the outside to play hammered dulcimer at an assembly when there was someone on the faculty that could play the instrument. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to talk with Lucille after the performance and she told me about SPUDS.

I arrived at my first SPUDS dance prepared to play the hammered dulcimer in the background. There was a large band on the stage, but there wasn't anyone else who could play piano for a contra dance. Although I played contra dance piano for many years in Massachusetts, I didn't know most of the tunes on the tune list and I hadn't played piano for a dance in over twelve years. Still, I jumped in and ended up playing the entire evening.

Since my baptism by fire, I have rarely missed a dance over the past ten years. I have made some great friends and grown as a musician. I have played with smaller bands, with different combinations of SPUDS musicians. Piles of music from the SPUDS collection are all over my house. It took a long time to find SPUDS, but it was certainly worth the wait. — Craig Newberger



SPUDS was a big band Thursday night, at least 30 people, but I turned out to be the only guitar. There were fiddles, mandolins, woodwinds (flutes, penny-whistles, etc), piano, accordion, hammered dulcimer (I love that instrument!), couple of small hand-drums, electric (as opposed to the more common upright) bass, and me strumming rhythm. The band leader (Enid) had some doubts about me because I hadn't been at the rehearsal, and she'd never seen me or heard me play before. But at the break she said I was doing fine, and by the end she was all smiles. Everyone played so well! The whole band sounded quite professional. Having all those people dancing to my strumming was a powerful rush. — Bob Salsburg

SPUDS helped make me into a “community musician.” Like many people I stopped playing music after college. I picked up my flute again when I offered to give my neighbor’s son flute lessons in exchange for early morning child care. At some point Peggy Leiby and I decided to go to a SPUDS jam.

Since then, I’ve played in other folk dance and contra dance bands. I teach international folk dance band music, help lead jam sessions, and play for dancers at summer camps, festivals, and workshops. I’ve played at juggling conventions, the Philadelphia Folk Festival, synagogues, churches, college reunions, nursing homes, girl scout meetings, and First Night celebrations, and even branched out into musical pit orchestras on some occasions.

SPUDS also influenced me to learn another instrument. When I saw other SPUDS people having fun playing the concertina, I bought one and learned to play it, and became a member of the Philadelphia Concertina Band.

I’m not a professional musician, but I have a great time, and I enjoy encouraging other people - especially adults - to play an instrument. When I meet someone new, if the subject of music or dance comes up, I usually ask the person if he/she plays an instrument. If the answer is “no”, I reply that the real answer is “not yet”.

We are lucky that the Philadelphia area has so many opportunities for musicians of all levels to play in open bands and jams, and for many people, SPUDS provides a great starting point. And I still enjoy playing with SPUDS.

— Carol Wadlinger



I can’t decide whether it’s more fun to dance or to play in the band. Both are on my list of the “funnest” things in the world to do, just under “you-know-what,” or maybe tied with it. I mean it. If my wife asked me to stay home from a contra-dance to make whoopee, it would be a tough decision! — Bob Salsburg