Having a Ball: Young New Yorkers Revive Old Dance Craze

Contra dancing offers an inclusive atmosphere where participants can work up a sweat, do a little courting

By **TYLER J. KELLEY**
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In one of the latest revivals of all things old-timey, more millennial New Yorkers are choosing to spend their Friday and Saturday nights sober and dancing in circles with strangers.

Their discovery: the centuries-old tradition of contra dancing.

Derived from English country dancing—think of the long paired lines of couples crisscrossing and partner-swapping in all those Jane Austen country-manor balls, now press fast forward—contra offers young urbanites an inclusive atmosphere where they can work up a little sweat away from the gym and touch human beings instead of screens.

At Brooklyn Contra, held at an unglitzy gym in Park Slope, Friday night dances have become so popular that its volunteer organizers recently added a second monthly event to the schedule. They are also helping set up new contra dances in Crown Heights and on Staten Island, they said.

One organizer, Avia Moore, 32 years old, said contra dancing's homey, welcoming aura provides a community many of her peers are looking for. "New York can be so isolating," she said.

Young converts to the contra craze spin and swing on a recent Friday night at Brooklyn Contra at Camp Friendship in Park Slope. *PHOTO: CASSANDRA GIRALDO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

David Chandler, 74, a longtime dancer and board member of Country Dance New York, which has hosted a contra dance in Greenwich Village for 50 years, said, “A new generation is really taking responsibility for contra dancing now—not just participating.”

For those more accustomed to socializing in dark clubs with exotic cocktails and pounding music, contra’s wholesome, folksy culture can come as a bit of a shock.

“The first thing I thought when I walked in the door is, where is the bar?” said Dakota Kim, 34, an event producer who recently attended her first contra dance in Brooklyn. “But then it’s so fun you don’t care.”

On the dance floor, partners start out facing each other in long lines while a live band plays jigs and reels. With the cadences of a comforting auctioneer, the caller calls out moves to dancers on the floor. Partners clasp hands, spin and look into each other’s eyes.

Traditionally the idea is to interact with everyone on the floor and say yes when anyone asks you to dance.

And while the new contra aficionados are adhering to some traditions, like no booze, they are adapting others—like requesting new, higher-energy dances.

“I call it my running instead of actually running,” said 23-year-old Shannon Sullivan. “I’d rather spend $12 on an entire night of fun than on a couple drinks and no guarantee of having a good time.”

Dancers twirl at Brooklyn Contra, which is attracting increasing number of young New Yorkers. *PHOTO:CASSANDRA GIRALDO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Not everyone likes the changes. Dudley Laufman, 84, of Canterbury, N.H., said the faster, more complicated pace of what he calls “modern urban contra” leaves no time for courting. “The nature of the dance itself has changed,” said Mr. Laufman, one of the few remaining fiddler-callers, widely credited with popularizing contra dancing in the U.S. beginning in the 1970s. “Courtship and camaraderie is always what the dance has been about”—not a workout, he said. Historically, while the wig-wearing gentry held contra dances in private ballrooms, the working class had them in their farmhouses.

“You would clean out the furniture from the house, and the fiddler, who would also be the caller, would sit in the sink,” said dance historian and caller David Millstone, 68.

Ms. Moore and fellow organizer Joe Rinehart, 35, a couple who met while contra dancing, deliberately market their dance to Brooklynites with a taste for the old-timey. On this night they look the part in a vintage dress and newsboy hat, respectively.

Diane Stephenson, 31, was a newcomer to the Friday dance. “Normally you don’t touch strangers, you don’t get that close to strangers and look them in the eye for extended periods,” she said.

“I don’t know what it is about the space,” said Ms. Stephenson, who works for a software company. “But it makes it feel OK.”

While the contra ethos maintains that anyone off the street is welcomed and taught to dance on the spot, it can be difficult to maintain a consistently safe space in an art form based on touching strangers.

Dancers participate in a circle dance at Brooklyn Contra. *PHOTO: CASSANDRA GIRALDO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

On the rare occasions when renowned local dance caller Bob Isaacs sees inappropriate touching or partnering, he said he works with organizers to quietly pilot the offender off the floor.
But as contra's youthful adopters take charge of the community, one convention is undergoing a change. "People, especially women, should be able to refuse a dance," saidMaia McCormick, a 21-year-old Manhattanite and up-and-coming caller.
Another change lies with the historical terms for partners—traditionally called "ladies" and "gents." These days, when Mr. Isaacs introduces the dance, he says, "ladies and gents is a dance role, not a gender."

Brooklyn Contra organizers Joe Rinehart and Avia Moore share a dance. *PHOTO: CASSANDRA GIRALDO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In Brooklyn, the caller announced that instead of "gents" and "ladies," he would be saying "jets" and "rubies" because some dancers have asked for genderless terms.
Whatever names are used, "it's a fantastic way to meet people," said Ms. Moore. "It can be flirty but safe."
After the recent dance, she and Mr. Rinehart exchanged a high-five as they tallied up attendance: 95 returning dancers and 20 first-timers.
One of those newcomers was Eileen Regan, 30, who works at a winery. The dancing was fun, but she said she couldn't help thinking "how much money we could be making if we set up a Jell-O shot booth here."