

Bob Henshaw: For the love of the dance by Don Bell

Bob Henshaw has always loved music and dance. Even as a kid, he was involved in organizing high school dance events. But he knew nothing of folk music or folk dance until he came to Albany in 1975. It was then that a friend lured him into contra dancing at the Fox Hollow Festival in Petersburg, NY. Bob says it was “love at first experience.” He signed on as a volunteer at Fox Hollow and started dancing regularly. He’s been dancing and volunteering ever since.

Besides the pure joy of contra dancing, Bob values contra’s egalitarian and communal nature. People from different backgrounds come to dance with each other. “You go ...to enjoy yourself, but just as much, to give joy to others... We all play a part in this dance community...We all make a good dance happen.” Bob also appreciates the informality of contra dancing and the fact that it is rooted in a long tradition of folk music and dance.

Running the Old Songs Contra Dances

In 1978, Bob started his “career” as a dance organizer. The Fox Hollow Festival had folded, and Andy Spence, director of the Old Songs organization, wanted to add a contra dance to the Old Songs repertoire of activities. Bob and Barb Counterman carried out her wish by starting a biweekly dance in Guilderland that alternated with the 8th Step dances in Albany. The Old Songs dances were more like céilidhs (or parties).The programs included a wider variety of dance formations, including longways, square, and round dances (unlike most of today’s contra dance events, where longways formations are done almost exclusively). Bob kept at it for 14 years, until 1993, when he turned the dance over to others.

Spreading the Word

In managing the Old Songs dances, Bob gained a tremendous amount of experience. He also learned a lot from thoughtful people like Larry Jennings, who was a major force in the New England dance scene. Being a teacher at heart, Bob loves sharing what he has learned with other dance organizers. (Bob was a Penn State biology professor before coming to Albany and has been teaching one way or another for 45 years). He regularly conducts workshops at the Flurry Festival on organizing successful dances and developed a presentation for the 2011 “Puttin’ on the Dance” conference of Northeast dance organizers.

What Makes a Good Dance Event

Bob came to recognize that good dances don’t just happen; they are carefully planned. Bob has identified five key players, all of whom are essential to creating a successful dance. 1.) The dance organizer arranges for the venue, engages the talent, and establishes the overall character of the dance with the aim of making it an inviting and fun event for all. When Bob and Barb ran the Old Songs dances, they did wacky things to enliven the event, like the time they put on an Easter bonnet contest and parade. 2.) The sound manager makes sure the musicians and caller are heard at their best. 3.) The musicians inspire the dancers with superb music. 4.) The caller is dynamic and guides the overall flow of the dance. 5.) Finally, the dancers must support each other so everyone has fun. Of course, to bring

dancers to the dance in the first place, you need publicity, but Bob believes happy dancers are the best form of publicity. They'll spread the word and attract more dancers the next time and the next time.

Winter DanceFest – a Precursor to the Flurry Festival

In the early 1980s Bob got the idea that Old Songs, in addition to their popular summertime music festival and evening dances, should sponsor a weekend festival devoted to contra dancing. He and Sharon O'Connor started surveying the regional dance calendar to see if there were any gaps when such an event could be scheduled. "Fall belongs to Philadelphia, spring belongs to NEFFA, and in summer there are festivals everywhere," but the winter season was wide open.

Of course, to make a winter-time event successful, Bob and Sharon would have to deal with the weather factor -- people, especially those coming from more distant places, might be reluctant to attend given the potential for bad driving conditions. To overcome this, Bob and Sharon began to sell local dancers on the idea of housing out-of-town dancers during a winter dance weekend. Then they travelled to various dance events around the Northeast spreading the word about the coming winter festival and offering accommodations with Capital Region hosts.

With the groundwork laid, the Old Songs organization sponsored the 1986 Winter Dancefest weekend in the Guilderland Middle School. Despite its success, the event was not repeated in 1987. Bob realized that such a festival entailed a year-round effort that he couldn't sustain at the time.

Paul Rosenberg really enjoyed the first Winter Dancefest; so when there was no festival the next year, he set out to organize one. On Saturday, February 13, 1988, the February Dance Flurry was launched at the Westmere Elementary School in Guilderland. Although Paul used the Winter Dancefest as a model for his festival, there were some differences. He featured mostly local musicians with only a few out-of-area performers and shared the proceeds with the struggling Pittsfield dance and the local Hudson Mohawk Country Dancers organization (HMTD).

Managing Sound at the Flurry Festival

Almost from the beginning, Bob managed the sound systems at the Flurry. At first, they rented or borrowed systems that were often less than top-notch. Volunteers did their best to manage the systems, but they lacked expertise and sometimes were spread too thin. Musicians, in particular, were distressed by the unreliable sound at the festival.

So, at Bob's insistence, the festival committee began to work on improving the situation. They started renting higher-quality sound systems and, instead of relying exclusively on volunteers, hired professional sound technicians and stage managers for the major venues. Because contra bands and dancers have unique requirements, the Festival avoided hiring people whose experience was in providing sound for rock 'n roll events. Audio professionals tuned to a folk sound were better equipped to address the particular needs of the Flurry.

Mentoring Young Talent

Always the teacher, Bob has especially enjoyed working with young people at the Flurry. Bob describes Ian Hamelin as "one of those wunder kids" who volunteered at an early age to help out at the

Flurry. Bob encouraged Ian's involvement in the folk dance community and promoted his development by entrusting him with adult-level responsibilities in sound management at the Flurry. Ian stayed with the dance scene and developed a close relationship with Bob, working together at both the Flurry and the dance barn at Old Songs Festival, where Bob also managed sound. Over those years, Ian worked his way up to a management position at Specialized Audio (sound provider for the Flurry and Old Songs). Together, Bob and Ian developed a more sophisticated approach to sound management in the larger halls at the Flurry. They focused on increasing the quality of the sound design while maintaining affordability through a detailed bid process. This long-term mentoring and collaboration resulted in significant increases in the quality of sound at the Flurry and much happier musicians, callers, and dancers.

Still Involved in the Flurry Festival

Bob is still involved in the Flurry Festival; he does logistical management for the dinnertime Saturday performance at the Saratoga Music Hall. Last year an audience of about 350 thoroughly enjoyed a performance by the Vanaver Caravan, a multi-cultural/multi-generational world dance and music company. Let's see what they come up with in 2013. Check it out!