

Making Arches in Moab—Callers Workshop

by Wendy Graham

There's more in Moab, Utah than just red rocks and mountain bike cyclists. Folk dance and music is alive and well in the Southwest's four corners. Monthly, residents and tourists gather at the community center for a dance led by a smorgasbord of budding local callers to tuneage by the Moab Community Dance Band (it's more like an orchestra!).

Moab is unique because of their commitment to local charities. Callers and musicians donate their time and dancers are asked for minimal donation. At the end of the night, what's left over is donated to the designated charity.

Stitching together the pieces of a growing community made up of budding callers, musicians playing a variety of instruments at all levels, and dancers of differing experience, can take time and work. So, the group invited me to lead a calling workshop with continuing education grant funds in June 2007. It became clear as I prepared for the workshop that there was a need for more than just programming and prompting tips. This community was struggling with band-caller relations, a discord noticeable even on the dance floor.

To address this area of concern, band members and callers were invited to a "lunch and learn." With three band members and five callers attending, I facilitated an open discussion to identify specific areas needing improvement. These were 1) communication prior to beginning the dance (tune requests), 2) during the dance (tempo), and 3) ending the dance (how many more times through, where to stand physically when giving this prompt).

With the groundwork laid, we got out of our seats and put our discussion into practice: the musicians took their places and each caller led an entire dance from "Take hands four" to "Thank your partner." Callers were tasked with paying special attention to communicating

their desires to the musicians before and during the dance. Musicians were encouraged to speak up if the caller did not adequately meet their needs/expectations. The trusting environment we created allowed callers, musicians and dancers to freely share constructive feedback.

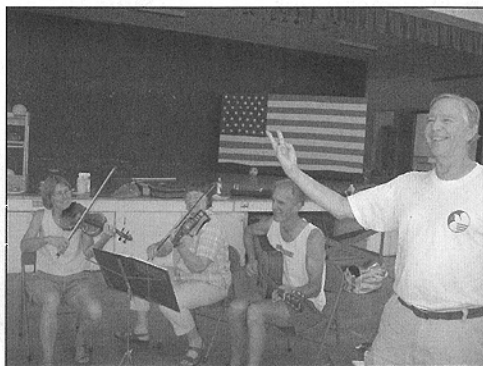
The workshop was an eye-opening learning experience for the callers, musicians and me. Empowering the musicians to ask for what they need and allowing callers to practice delivering clear communication was the breakthrough needed to start building a bridge between a disconnected community band and its budding callers.

Many caller workshops I've attended are focused on discussion among callers only. This format has its merits, but when building a community is an important factor, incorporating musicians in a moderated format and physically practicing what is being discussed can be the key that allows a group to get to the heart of the issue. If your community desires to arch over an ongoing hurdle, arrange a "retreat" (outside of monthly meetings), invite an outside moderator as needed, and create a safe environment for attendees to share feedback.

Hope we'll see you on dance floor out here in the Southwest's four corners some day!

P.S. A three month follow up report, from the viewpoint of the band: Consistent hand signals (as agreed upon in the workshop) and suggested tempos from the callers are just two ways we're seeing a more cooperative and less adversarial atmosphere between band and callers [since] the workshop.

Wendy Graham is a caller and organizer for Durango, Colorado's monthly dance, music and workshop series; she can be reached at wendygraham00@hotmail.com or via www.folkmaids.com/wendy.html.



Top: Colin Egan practices providing clear hand signals to the band (Donna Neuneker, Carina Ravelly, Mike Duncan); bottom: Workshop callers (back row, left to right) Miriam Graham, Wendy Graham (facilitator), Colin Egan; (front) Bob Phillips, Peggy Harty, Judy Powers. Photos courtesy Wendy Graham; used with permission.