

# Calling the Best Beginner Party

By Jim Wass

The Beginner Party, sometimes called a Hoedown or Party Dance and other names, refers to a dance event at which the caller will lead a group of non-square dancers in a program for which they have received no previous instruction or indoctrination and after which they are not necessarily expected to square dance again. Sometimes the dancing is the main program for the event; sometimes it is combined with other entertainment or other functions. I present the following as a belief system that, if adopted by and practiced by a competent caller, will ensure the best success in calling for party dances:

- *The best Party Dance programs involve little active recruiting. For most of the people the party itself is their destination program and may be the only such program they ever dance. They may dance with you once each year and consider themselves “Square Dancers”. Hard-selling your next class is not appropriate. You will be okay announcing once or twice something like: “If you think you might like to do more of this I have some information on the table.” Be ready with your business card and class flyer if somebody asks, but entertain them rather than sell them.*
- *The best Party Dance programs are not limited to any of our established lists of calls. Since we are not recruiting and not beholden to a class program we can use whatever we want to entertain the people attending the event. Line dances, traditional dances, novelty dances, contras and modern squares are all legitimate content and I encourage you to learn to use all of these forms.*
- *The best Party Dance programs involve little instruction. It is not our objective to “teach” those attending to square dance. The people are there only to have fun. If a complicated teach is involved these people are in class and not at the party they had hoped to enjoy. When I do a Party Dance program I use as much plain language as I can to get people dancing a figure. I make a joke if I have to take the needle off of the record to explain a new call.*
- *The best Party Dance programs are varied and flexible in music. It’s wonderful that within our square dance literature we have a wide variety of music from the most traditional (or hokey) to some very modern and “hip” sounds. Have examples of all of this material ready for any PARTY DANCE program that you do. (Be aware of the sensitivities of your group – some singing calls might work very well with one group and be very offensive to another.)*
- *The best Party Dance programs are well planned and programmed but can be turned on a dime. Going into one of these events you can ask questions of the organizers and have a good idea of what you might face. But organizers often do not have perfect knowledge of who will show up for the event or may neglect to tell you about some of the event plans (like a band or a DJ). You may have planned for adults and discover that many have brought their children or their parents. You may need to scale the program up or down. This is often best accomplished by creating alternative dance plans. I always come prepared to do several different dances and ready to work around program surprises.*
- *Better teachers and better showmen will be better Party Dance callers. You are an entertainer; these folks are looking for a show. All of your showmanship tricks can be put to very good use at the Party Dance. Though you are being subtle about it you are still teaching them to do calls, so any of the tricks you develop for a quick teach are very valuable at the Party Dance event.*

“Calling the Best Beginner Party”

A belief system suggested to callers leading dance parties for people who don’t ordinarily square dance  
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- *The Party Dance can be adapted to practically any group for any occasion in any location.* I've done corporate parties, churches, synagogues, community fairs, schools, children, and senior citizens, as well as developmentally disabled. We've celebrated birthdays, anniversaries, community day, Fridays, Saturdays, and other occasions. I've worked in large halls, outdoors, living rooms, kitchens, and many other venues. Each group, occasion, and location has its own challenges and advantages, but very successful programs can be designed and delivered for each.
- *The best Party Dance programs have a lasting positive impact on the people you are entertaining.* You want them to feel good about the dance experience, because how they feel about the dancing will determine:
  - How they feel about square dancing in general;
  - How they feel about the event they just attended (birthday, wedding reception, church social, picnic); and
  - How they feel about you (and whether to ever invite you back - much of *Party Dance* business is return calls and referrals.)
- *The best Party Dance programs can become a large part of your square dance income, and you should charge appropriately for your services.* With declining attendance and increasing hall rent it's difficult to earn much money in club calling. When I do a local PARTY DANCE my asking price is usually at least double and often more than triple what I would charge a local club. Organizers of these events generally don't compare your price to that they have paid other callers; instead they compare you to a band or DJ or whatever entertainer that they might otherwise consider for the event.
- *The best Party Dance programs are some of the most exciting and fulfilling programs to call.* The *Party Dance* is my favorite program. For many of the people attending the event this is their first exposure to square dancing. To provide it to them is an honor and a great joy. It was a thrill for me to get an enthusiastic ovation for a one-hour dance program from 300 attendees at an international physics symposium. I more recently called a father-daughter dance; one of the organizing Moms, excusing herself for leaving on a brief errand opened with "You're wonderful!"
- *The Party Dance is one of the greatest programs that we as square dance callers have.* It offers us a variety of opportunities and benefits:
  - You can be very flexible and creative in your program – you are not bound by any program list or dance style.
  - The folks attending these events are incredibly appreciative – most will have never seen you before and will often treat you like you are Garth Brooks, Gloria Estevan, Mel Torme, or another celebrated performer – you'll feel (justifiably) as much the entertainer as Tony Oxendine, Deborah Carroll-Jones, or anyone else you might hold as a model caller.
  - The challenge of working with many and varied groups can be a fine reward.
  - For recurring events the organizers can be very loyal. I have several that will move their event date until they can synchronize with my schedule.
  - The money is great – you are offering your services as an entertainer; you are competing with a band, a DJ, a clown, and a magician. You are not booking as *just* a club caller.

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