

History of Contra Dance Music



At the end of the 17th century, English country dances were taken up by French dance masters. The French called these dances contra-dances or contredanses. As time progressed, these dances returned to England and were spread and reinterpreted in the United States, and eventually the French form of the name came to be associated with the American folk dances, where they were alternatively called "country dances" or in some parts of New England such as New Hampshire, "contra dances".

Contra dances were fashionable in the United States and were considered one of the most popular social dances across class lines in the late 18th century, though these events were usually referred to as "country dances" until 1780s, when the term contra dance became more common to describe these events.

In the mid-19th century, group dances started to decline in popularity in favor of quadrilles, lancers, and couple dances such as the waltz and polka. By the late 19th century, square dances too had fallen out of favor, except in rural areas. When squares were revived (around 1925 to 1940, depending on the region), contra dances were generally not included. In the 1930s and 1940s, contra dances appear to have been done only in small towns in widely scattered parts of northeastern North America, such as Ohio, the Maritime provinces of Canada, and particularly northern New England. Ralph Page almost single-handedly maintained the New England tradition until it was revitalized in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly by Ted Sannella and Dudley Laufman.

By then, early dance camps, retreats, and weekends had emerged, such as Pinewoods Camp, in Plymouth, Massachusetts, which became primarily a music and dance camp in 1933, and NEFFA, the New England Folk Festival, also in Massachusetts, which began in 1944. These and others continue to be popular and some offer other dancing and activities besides contra dancing.



Next Meeting - April 13th
2:00 P.M.
 Huntsville/Madison County
 Public Library Auditorium

**HTMA Coffeehouse
 Music Series**
Presents

*The
 Blue Velvet Band*

*opening music by
 Bluewater Road*

APRIL 24TH
 7:00 PM



OLD COUNTRY CHURCH

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- April 2014 Area Events -

New Hope Saturday Night Jam

Every Saturday night in April starting at 6:00 PM New Hope Senior Center, New Hope Alabama

Elmcroft Retirement Home April 5th - starting at 3:00 PM

8020 Benaroya Ln. Huntsville, Alabama

The Devere Pride Trio April 6th - starting at 6-9:00 PM

Straight to Ale Brewery Tap Room Huntsville, Alabama
<http://www.straighttoale.com/>

Harbor Chase Retirement Home

April 12th - starting at 10:30 AM
4801 Whitesport Cr.; Huntsville, Alabama

HTMA Meeting April 13th - 2:00 PM Huntsville Public Library Huntsville Alabama

Green Mountain Bluegrass Jams - starting April 13th -
then every 2nd Sunday thru Summer/Autumn weather permitting -
from 2-5:30 PM - Madison County Nature Trail, Huntsville, Alabama

Alabama Folk School - Bluegrass and Gees Bend
at Camp McDowell - April 14 - 17th, Nauvoo, Alabama

Curtis & Loretta Concert - April 19th

Berkeley Bob's Coffeeshouse, 304 1st Ave SE, Cullman Alabama
<http://www.berkeleybob.com>

HTMA Coffeeshouse - The Blue Velvet Band - ***opening music by Bluewater Road***

April 24th 7:00 PM
Burritt on the Mountain Old Country Church, Huntsville, AL

Regency Retirement Village Gig April 26th starting at 3:15 PM 2004 Max Luther Drive - Huntsville, Alabama

Panoply of the Arts - April 25-27 -

Big Spring Park, Huntsville, Alabama
Strong music lineup all three days

HTMA Executive Board

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Position of: **Performance Chair**
Needs to be filled for 2014

Please contact

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or

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if you wish to help the HTMA in a very
important position!

Visit our website www.huntsvillefolk.org





The Berry Patch

We all have warts. Let's leave it to others to determine if our warts are genetic or environmental in nature and agree we all have them.

Just as I thought. If you are less than age twenty, you deny having warts. If less than thirty, sometimes when no one is looking, you suspect you may have a wart, but you make no mention of it. By forty, privately you are almost certain you have had a wart or two in the past and strongly suspect you have, maybe, two in the present. But either past or present, it is not for publication. Oh, it's alright to joke about having a wart, but you always confess it in a jovial manner.

By age fifty, the choke-hold of having warts begins to lose its grip. You know others have warts, you've been seeing that for fifty years and you strongly suspect that others have seen some of your warts too. So, what the heck, you take a chance and tell you sister, minister, lover, barber or hair-dresser that you have a wart, or two. And, you confess this in a serious manner.

Age sixty seems to be the turning point for warts. About this age, you realize that you have present warts, past warts, and will have future warts. And, you realize the other person is much like you. You start to laugh, really laugh, at some of your present and past warts. Others, your age, start laughing in the same key, you're both singing from the same page.

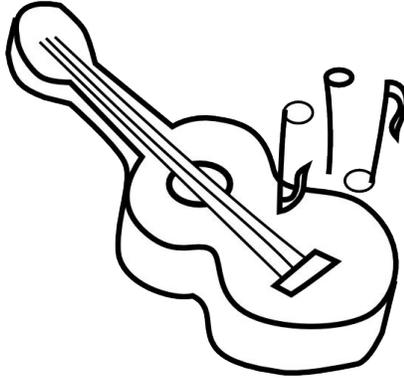
By seventy, you have revealed most of your warts. Most, but not all. There are some warts you do not disclose, and likely never will, but those are warts of the past and no longer heavy to carry.

By the time you're eighty-four, that's me, you're prone to say, "This is me, warts and all." By this age, warts are not a burden and those you'll never disclose are things of yesterday.

Joe

Musical Notes - Strings & Things

by Jerry LeCroy



Ever wonder who set the standards for string sizes on guitars, fiddles, and the like. And what's the big difference between medium, light, and extra light guitar strings anyway? I wondered.

I learned a few years back one of the most important jobs in designing a piano is “scaling” the piano. After the designer has selected the principal scale length (the length of the longest bass string), he has to decide what diameter and weight of string to use for each note. The choices made at this stage are critical to the tonality of the instrument, and in addition define the possible dynamic range and the piano's sustain characteristics.

For a guitar or banjo, or any string instrument, the string choices affect tone, playability, and instrument life. The heavier the strings are, the higher the string tension will need to be. For a given action height (the distance between the string and the fret) the force required to note the string will be more-or-less proportional to the string tension. How big is the variance? Typical extra light string sets will have individual string tensions between 16 and 27 pounds, light sets between 23 and 30 pounds, and mediums 26-37 pounds. The strings on my baritone get up to 47 pounds tension per string. That means that keying a string on the baritone might take three times the force as on a guitar strung with extra light strings.

That extra force means that the guitar is slower to play, because it takes a certain amount of time for a finger to apply the required keying force. The higher string tension also puts more load on the guitar, stressing the bridge plate attachment, the entire top of the guitar, and the neck and tuners. Those heavy strings are, in general, difficult for the entire structure of the instrument. The heavier keying forces even cause the frets to wear faster. So why would anyone volunteer to work harder and wear out their guitar by choosing heavy-weight strings? Well, it turns out that the heavy strings take more energy to start vibrating at any level. A heavier string can accept more energy before it deflects so far in vibration that it starts hitting a fret and making horrible buzzing noises.

A moderate stroke on a heavy string can sound pretty soft, and yet still have a good sustain time. And that bluegrass cannon dreadnought with medium strings can get loud enough to compete with banjos. (That is really loud!). The heavier strings give the player more choices in dynamics, better sustain, and better tone (lower inharmonicity).

What the dickens is inharmonicity? Inharmonicity turns out to be the effect that makes higher order harmonics of a guitar string not exactly integer multiples of the string's primary tone. If a guitar A string is tuned to 220 Hz, its second and third harmonics would like to be 440 and 660 Hz, but they generally are a bit sharp. The harmonics may be anything from one percent to over ten percent higher than simple integer multiples of the primary frequency.

Harmonics are always present to some extent on a string instrument, and as the offset between the “perfect” harmonic frequencies and what you get in real life increases, the resultant sound becomes less pleasing to human ears. You can easily experiment with harmonicity effects at home. When you pluck a string on your instrument in the middle, the first harmonic will be the dominant tone. As you pluck the string closer and closer to the bridge, higher order harmonics tend to get excited more, and the timbre of the sound changes markedly. Try it yourself, and see where you like the sound best. What you hear may cause you to decide to change your playing style.

On some instruments, we don’t really have much choice on string weight. If the builder decided to design the top as light and responsive as possible, with minimal bracing to reduce the sound output, then it may be that all you can do is string it with light or very light strings. If you have a guitar, though, that you like to play but just doesn’t sound rich enough or have enough sustain, try changing strings before you sell it. Heavier strings can change the tonal character of an instrument drastically, often for the better.

If you have a guitar that is just no fun to play because the action is too high, go see a luthier about getting the action adjusted so you can once again enjoy playing it. Action height is changing almost continuously on our acoustic instruments. It changes with temperature swings, as the wood gets dryer or more moist, or as the wood structure gradually takes a set under string tension. The action moving doesn’t mean that you have a poorly made instrument, some instability is a fact of life for almost all instruments. Even Stradivari fiddles have to be fixed from time to time.

The only exceptions I can think of are the carbon fiber guitars like those made by Rainsong, and maybe the Martin numbers with phenolic tops. I don’t think that either of those instruments are competitive musically with the better wood instruments, though they are certainly more stable.

So string weight and tension matter. Other factors can also make a difference – including the alloy used for winding the outer wraps on bass strings, funny core construction (for instance silk-and-steel strings), and other features like flat windings, or windings that are plated or coated with Teflon. I like the Elixir Teflon-coated strings, mainly because they seem to last longer for me before getting hard to tune than un-coated strings. I know some musicians who won’t use coated strings, though, because they don’t care for the resultant tone.

As far as I can tell, there aren’t any “right” answers in string selection. You just have to experiment with different strings, try to be sensitive to the differences, and decide what you like. Please don’t assume a new set of strings is better just because it sounds better than the ones you took off, though. Any strings that have been on a guitar or fiddle more than a few months are no longer at their best, and comparing their sound with new strings is worse than useless. It can lead you astray.

If it sounds as if I’m telling you to run down to the store and buy a bunch of different strings to experiment with, I suppose I am doing just that. If you can, please think about patronizing our local music store friends, like Brian Dawson at the Fret Shop and Bill Graviett and Harmony Sound. At either of these local stores you can probably find good advice to help you find strings that will bring out the best in your instrument. And any time I go there, I also manage to try out a dozen or so guitars I haven’t played before.

Contrary to some people’s opinions, that is NEVER a waste of time.

Best wishes for spring 2014,
Jerry LeCroy