

So You Want to Play for Traditional Dances!

by John Letheren

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Foreword

If you have ever thought about playing music for country dancing, Ceilidhs, Playford or English Folk Dances or just simply a Barn Dance, then this book is for you.

It starts at the very beginning and explains, step by step, how to set up, or just play in, a good COUNTRY DANCE BAND.

I have, over the years, established my own band and a musicians club and studied and played with some of the best musicians and bands in the country (United Kingdom), but I can well remember what it was like being a raw beginner, so this puts me in a very good position to explain the route from square one all the way to the top.

I have avoided using technical terms as much as possible, but there is one chapter on basic music theory and harmony which I hope you will find of interest.

John Letheren November 1992

Introduction.

The sensation of dancing to music has delighted and excited people throughout the world ever since some ancient ancestor performed a few steps to the rhythm of a primitive drum or chant.

It is a wonderful thing that you can take a hall full of perfectly ordinary sober people of vastly different ages and within half an hour or so have them all dancing around (often with total strangers) and shrieking with delight and calling for more!

I refer not to some pop festival but to a BARN DANCE which may be held in a barn but more likely in a school or village hall. For this you have a CALLER (or M.C. - master of ceremonies) to try to keep some sort of order and explain the dances to the dancers, and MUSIC.

Incidentally, to avoid any ambiguity I shall spell Dance with a capital D when I mean an evening of dancing, and with a small d when I mean one dance.

Live music is always used for a real Dance, and so it should be! Recorded music, however good in itself, is no substitute for a real live band. Everybody knows that with recorded music "a few more turns" means doing the whole dance again which is always far too long, and a good band can pace the music to the dancers, be they youngsters or pensioners, and they will have the music ready for the next dance within a few seconds, even when the caller is playing ducks and drakes with the programme. How long have you had to wait at a club evening while the caller tried to find the right track on the record or the right place on the tape (and then played the wrong one)? And how many recorded tunes are either too long or too short for the dance, or just a bit too fast or a bit too slow? A good caller will know when the dancers have had just enough and will signal the band to stop - in good time.



It is just as much fun playing at a Dance as it is dancing, and even if they are doing the same old dance for the millionth time, you as a musician can always find a new tune to slip in, or add another part, or put in a new variation to keep it alive and exciting. A BORED BAND MAKES A BORING EVENING for everyone.

There are some excellent 'classical' musicians who are hopeless at playing for dancing for reasons which will soon become apparent.

If you listen to a group of children playing recorders, for example, the music may be beautifully in tune and in time, but just imagine trying to dance to it! The missing ingredient is called LIFT and without it the music is, for dancing, quite useless. Now I am not saying anything against children playing recorders, in fact it is because they play so exactly to the written music that the ingredients for dancing are missing, beautiful though it may be to listen to.

To play for dancing you have to acquire a number of essential skills which are NOT written in the music. I cannot guarantee to teach you all these tricks of the trade in one little book, but if you know what it is you are trying to achieve then that is half the battle.

Skim through this book by all means, but I do advise coming back to it and reading it again from time to time. You can't expect to become a professional band musician in one week, but you CAN start by playing very easy tunes and the dancers will love them. Then you can widen your repertoire and start introducing TECHNIQUE or LIFT which turns a job lot of musicians into a REALLY GOOD BAND.

Also I really do insist that you go to some Dances and DANCE. This will give you a feel for what the dancers want, and you can study the band at the same time.

Good luck!

Chapter 1: Where to start.

First, of course, you need to be able to play an instrument. If you haven't made your choice yet, or if you are thinking about taking up another instrument, choose one which is suitable for use in a band. There is not much call for a glockenspiel, harp, tuba or bassoon (although no doubt someone somewhere plays one of these in a band and does it very well). The usual choice is fiddle, accordion, drums, bass guitar and keyboard, but other instruments are quite acceptable. I shall not lay down the law about what you can and cannot play in a band because it depends on the other instruments you have in your group. One treble recorder is fine, but six are not. A double bass for example can be very effective. So can a tenor recorder, but being a very quiet instrument it needs amplification or it will not be heard at all. Piano is dodgy because few halls have a piano, especially one which is in tune, but an electronic keyboard, or "stage piano" is fine.

The ideal band has MELODY (fiddle, recorder, etc.) RHYTHM (drum) and BASS (double bass, bass guitar), with or without an accordion.

Learn to read music. There are musicians about who cannot, and some who think you shouldn't, and although some play well enough, they are limited to the number of tunes they can 'pick up' and remember. It is well worth listening carefully to good 'play by ear' musicians as they often

use little tricks in playing which the average music reader is not aware of. As soon as you can play some easy tunes, learn to play them without looking at the music. Then you have the best of both worlds, and you can play to the dancers instead of playing into a sheet of music which is much better.

In this book I shall assume a very basic ability to read music, but nothing more.

Do not dismiss a musical education as being irrelevant to playing for dancing. Taking lessons from a qualified teacher and taking music exams (practical and theory) will teach you to play your instrument and understand music all the better, but are not strictly necessary for band work. On the other hand, ignore people (usually music teachers) who tell you dance music is not worth bothering with, and even go so far as to suggest it may spoil your playing! Good folk musicians have skills which many a good musician with a classical training cannot get anywhere near. I can claim to have no bias here because I run a band, and I play in an amateur orchestra, and I love both. Far from one 'spoiling' the other I find the opposite is true.

Compared with orchestral music, folk dance music looks very simple. IT ISN'T. All you have is the bare tune, with none of the dots and squiggles of classical music which tell you how to play every note and phrase. You have to learn the technique by study (watching, listening to and if possible playing with experts) and, of course, many long hours of practise.

Recommended music for starting

JOIN THE BAND (EFDSS)
FOLLOW THE BAND (Cotswold Music.)
Memories in Waltz Time ([DLBMUSIC](#))
Shades of Brown ([DLBMUSIC](#))

There are hundreds of good books available, but try to ensure that everyone in your group or band has the same books, and then you can all practise the tunes at home. If you buy books without chords (see chapter 8) your accordion or keyboard player may not be happy.

When you are playing some easy tunes on your instrument and reading music, it is time to think about band practise.

Chapter 2: Band Practise

Choose VERY easy tunes at first. As I said earlier, dancers will enjoy simple tunes if they are played well and it will not matter at all that they are "easy beginner's pieces". Nobody wants to hear difficult tunes played badly, practise those at home.

When you practise, don't just play a tune through once and stop at the end. Always go back to the beginning, even if you only play the first couple of bars again. You need to be able to play a tune through more than once for dancing and it is surprisingly difficult to do that if you haven't practised.

You will soon find that tunes you could play perfectly well at home fall apart in a band practise. Just ignore it. Nobody learned to ride a bicycle without falling off a few times. Just keep working on it and it will improve. The trick is not to worry about mistakes and then they will go away. Even after years of practise the same thing can happen with an unfamiliar tune in any band.

Have a good laugh and start again. Remember dance music is supposed to be FUN (I have never found any other use for it myself).

New books of dance music tend to have "second parts" these days. If you want to have a go at them, make absolutely sure you can play the tune first before trying the second part. It is not intended to be an easy option to get out of playing a difficult tune! Practise the second part on your own until you can play it easily. You will find it quite difficult at first to fit it to the first part, but it only needs a little practise.

I quite like the whole band to play a tune through once or twice in unison before bringing in the second part. It means the dancers just have the basic tune initially while they are getting the hang of the dance, and the entry of the second part is then quite dramatic, but this is only a personal view.

One more word about second parts: they should accompany the main tune, not overpower it. You may think nobody can hear you playing your beautiful second part, but if you play it too loudly you will definitely spoil the music. The dancers want to hear the tune, and although your harmony may be lovely, don't overdo it!

Appoint a leader for the session. The leader doesn't have to be the 'best' musician. It is essential that one and only one person leads the band, gets off to a good start, and takes the lead if the band gets lost, which is very common. The leader tends to be the accordion player because the instrument is loud and the player can shout over it, but do take turns to lead practise sessions.

You may have to lead off a tune at a Dance one evening when your 'lead person' is away and although you have heard it done dozens of times before, when you are standing on the platform with a room full of impatient dancers looking at you it is not a good time to find out that you never actually learnt how to do it yourself!

The first thing is how to start playing a tune all together. The dancers will want to know that too. An easy way is for the leader to play two introductory notes **IN TIME WITH THE BEAT OF THE TUNE**. These must be played with two very definite beats. If the tune has four crotchets in the bar played as two beats, then

the lead-in notes will be two minims. Similarly, if the tune is in six-eight time then the lead-in will be two dotted crotchets. It should be pointed out that these notes are often shown in the music as quavers! Frequently the music will not have any lead-in notes shown at all. In this case, unless you are into music theory, just find two notes which sound right and write them in. It helps when beginning if all the players can watch the leader as this will give a good feel for the timing.

Although dances do vary in speed, the average jig or reel (to be explained shortly) requires a beat of about 120 per minute. That is two beats, or one bar, per second. The leading-in must be at just the right speed because if you start a tune too fast or too slow it is very difficult to change it.

It is very important to look at the music and work out the tune and the speed (and the key) in your head before beginning to play.

If you don't, it is very easy to start playing the first two or three notes in quite the wrong rhythm, and then you have to admit defeat and start again.

There are other ways of starting, such as playing the last two or four bars of the tune, but although this sounds nice it is difficult for the dancers to know exactly when to begin. Please do NOT do what some bands do and pause after the introduction or the whole sense of timing is lost. A heavy beat or chord just before the first beat of the tune will tell them when to start - but it may be too late by then. If you are playing for people who know their dances the caller can announce "four bars introduction" and they will know what to do, but that is no good at a Barn Dance because although all the people present will be bright and intelligent, they may not have the experience to know exactly what four bars sound like.

Next consider the ending. The band must tell the dancers exactly when to finish or they will be half way through the first figure again before they realise it is all over. A simple method is to chop up the last bar. For our 'four crotchets in a bar' tune, the last bar can be played as one crotchet, pause (three crotchet rests), and then a final chord. A total silence during the pause is most effective. Anyone playing through it buys the band a drink (each).

You can sometimes create a nice ending by 'turning the tune up' at the end to finish an octave higher on the last note, but you have to work this out with the rest of your group.

Do practise nice clean starts and finishes EVERY time. It is no good playing nice dance music if the dancers don't know when to start or when to end, and a messy ending really does spoil a good dance.

Now we come to the actual tune in the middle. For some reason all bands have a tendency to get faster and faster as they play. This MUST be avoided or it will upset the dancers. They will put up with a great deal in the way of wrong notes but they absolutely insist on a steady beat. I think this happens because when you first begin to play you have to struggle to get up to speed, and having got used to playing as fast as you can you then get too fast. It is also a strange fact that musicians tend to play too fast during the difficult bits rather than the easy bits. This is due to PANIC. Somehow you must always manage to play as though you could really play a lot faster if you wanted to. Above all BE RELAXED, and in fast difficult bits TRY TO LAG BEHIND the others. Then you will probably be with them instead of half a bar ahead.

In dance music you need not take the notes exactly as written. You can take out tricky bits and simplify them. If long notes appear boring, break them up into shorter notes. As long as the general shape and rhythm are preserved you can chop and change the music, within reason, to suit your needs. This would be a criminal offence in an orchestra, but quite normal for dancing. Feel free!

A useful tip! If you cannot play a fast reel or Jig, just play the first note of each bar or half-bar (but not too long or it will run into the following notes). So long as somebody somewhere plays the other notes it will sound fine. Much better than if you struggle along trying to play all the notes and doing it badly, and you will add a bit of extra beat too. Practise all the other notes at home, don't think you can leave out all the tricky notes for ever! Another useful tip when encountering a run of fast quavers or semiquavers is to lengthen (or 'lean on') the first one of each group. I will say more about this later.

Understand that the elusive LIFT or dance-ability of the music DOES NOT COME FROM PLAYING LOUD AND FAST.

It is much more subtle. When you see Morris dancers in action, listen to the music and you will realise that it is really very slow. It is the manner of playing which can hurl six or eight men up into the air so easily.

Another essential ingredient for a band is to always LISTEN TO THE OTHERS and play WITH them. It does spoil a band if they are not all playing together as a group, and if one big-head is trying to out-play the others it sounds awful.

There is a Russian fable about some animals who try to play music together, but it doesn't sound right, so they keep changing the seating arrangements around, until in the end some passing creature says, "You my friends, whichever way you sit, will never make musicians!".

This may be true of bad musicians, but now that you are (quite) good musicians, it does in fact make a big difference where you sit.

Firstly, it is not a good thing if the band is too spread out. Sit as close together as you can, allowing for elbows, etc. and arrange yourselves so that you never have a loud instrument between two quiet ones or they will not be able to hear each other. It is absolutely essential that every musician can hear every other musician all the time. If you consider an orchestra, the seating arrangements have been carefully worked out over a very long period of time and you could not possibly just let the musicians sit anywhere they liked.

It is not so that the conductor knows where they are, it is because they can hear each other better.

It is rather dull if you play the same tune over and over again for a long dance, so it is usual to change tunes. Do not try to be too clever or too ambitious. We find that as a general rule two tunes are enough for one dance. If you keep on changing from tune to tune, however skilfully, the dancers will not settle into the dance. Also you will soon run out of tunes.

You absolutely must practise ALL the changes before the Dance. Playing each tune twice and then changing over is a good rule and makes counting easy, but keep your concentration or you will suddenly realise you have not the faintest idea which tune comes next. It is a strange thing but if you lose it, the chances are that everyone else in the band has lost it too. The leader must make a quick decision and the rest must follow. If you think the leader has gone wrong do not try to battle it out! It is better to have a band all playing the wrong tune than playing two different tunes at once.

Before you can change from one tune to another (and back) there are usually some odd half bars at the beginnings or ends which must be sorted out. Never try anything new at a Dance, and I speak here from experience!

When you think you are ready, or better still - when someone else does, play for a club evening. The music may be unpolished but it is good practise for you and at the very worst they will appreciate their records all the more afterwards, although I am sure they will enjoy it really. There is a whole chapter later about playing for a Dance, so have a look at that before you go.

Be ready to ask for and take criticism. The worst thing you can do is to think you know better than the dancers. You provide the service, they are the customers, and they know best. They may not know anything about playing in a band, but they do know what is good for dancing. ASK and LISTEN to what they say.



THE BEST BAND IS THE ONE THE DANCERS LIKE BEST, not the one which thinks it's the best. Try out new ideas by all means, but if they are not popular, drop them again.

By the way, make a point of going back to the same club from time to time as you improve, or there is a danger that years later, when you have a really top class band, someone from the club will say, "Oh, we had them once and they were terrible!".

There is one rule we absolutely insist on when playing for dancing and that is **NOBODY PLAYS WHILE THE CALLER IS SPEAKING**. It is also ill-mannered to talk except very quietly and only to discuss the next piece of music. It is very difficult for the caller to concentrate on walking a dance through if one or more members of the band are tootling away at the tune or talking. You should have practised the music before you came, and if you haven't, well just shut up and give the caller a chance! At band practise make a rule not to play, however quietly, when the leader or anyone else is speaking and then you will not do it at a real Dance. It is certainly a good idea to finger the tune through while you are waiting, but it must be done silently (no bow, no blow).

Make some recordings at your practise sessions.

It may sound revolting at first, but you can hear all sorts of things on a recording which you are just not aware of when you are playing, and it really will improve your performance.

You are now playing as a group, doing nice starts, snappy finishes, and changing from tune to tune without any change in the beat.

Congratulations! Now for a few simple terms.

Chapter 3: Jigs, Reels, Hornpipes, etc.

Tunes usually come in two sections with eight bars in each. The first section is called the A music and the second section is called the B music. If there is a third section it is called C music and so on but two sections are usual. If the A music has eight bars and the B music has eight bars, then you play the A twice and the B twice and that is 32 bars total which will fit the majority of dances.

However, some dances require 48 bars (it is the caller's job to tell you this!) so you have to play the A twice, the B twice and then one A and one B (and keep repeating this sequence). with a bit of practise this is quite easy. Personally, I count with my feet. I use my right foot to tap the beat for the first time, my left foot for the second time, and both feet (easier when seated) for the one time through each tune. other band persons seem to have their own methods. You can count (in your head) all the way through "ONE te tiddly ONE te turn" changing to "TWO te tiddly TWO te turn" for the second time through and so on, but I find this method too difficult. If you like it, use it.

Now, be warned! Sometimes a tune has an 8-bar A music (repeated) and a 16-bar B music (not repeated) so if you try the ABBAB sequence, total chaos will ensue. If you want to use this type of tune you can play two 8-bar A's and two 16-bar B's which give you the 48 bars you require. There are a few useful tunes which have 8-bar A and Band C sections so you just play each section twice, but unfortunately these are rare.

There are other numbers of bars used but 32 and 48 are the most common, and dances requiring weird numbers of bars usually have their own tunes written out in full so it is not really a problem.

The caller will turn to you at a Dance, suddenly and without warning, and demand "5 by 48 jigs". He or she will be trying to control a shrieking crowd and get them to listen to the instructions for the next dance so you do NOT ask what that means! It means play a total of five jigs which are 48 bars long each. You could play the same jig five times but I find counting beyond two is difficult (not enough feet) so I would play one tune twice and another tune twice and then go back to the first tune once more because it is nice to finish on the tune you started with. It also gives the dancers a nice cosy feeling of having arrived home. If you get a "4 by 32 reel" thrown at you it means a 32 bar reel played four times, or you could use two tunes and play 1221 or 1121.

Having promised to explain jigs and reels I will now do so.

A REEL has four crotchets in the bar, or sometimes two crotchets or four quavers, and is played with two beats in the bar at about two beats (one bar) per second.

A Jig is in 6/8 time and each half bar is either a Crotchet plus a quaver, or three semi-quavers. It is also played about two beats (one bar) per second.

A Hornpipe tune looks like a reel, but it is played with two very firm beats in a bar, and it must be very steady and never rushed. The beats are somewhat faster than a second, so it is just over half the speed of a reel.



There are some other rhythms, but they are not difficult and the ones above will cover most Barn dance tunes.

Sometimes in the course of a dance you need to change from a reel to a jig or vice versa. In this case be sure to count two beats to the bar in the reel and then you can slip easily into the two beats of jig time. In technical language minims in the reel become dotted crotchets in the jig. It is

not common, but if you are counting the reel as four crotchets to the bar you will get a nasty shock trying to change to six quavers!

Your band should now be ready to play for real Dances, on a small scale, and then you can start to think about TECHNIQUE or how to play so that the public absolutely cannot resist dancing. It is no good shouting at people to come and dance. If you do your job properly they will be jumping up to dance as soon as they hear the music.

Chapter 4: Playing for a Dance.

This may sound obvious but when you get your first booking, hopefully at a club venue and not a big Dance, make sure you know where it is, and what time it starts, and make sure everyone gets there half an hour early (if the hall is open).

You will probably not be taking P.A. equipment at first, but if you are then make sure you know exactly how to set it all up and allow yourself plenty of extra time for that. Also make sure everyone knows what to do and helps. It is easy to sit back and let Fred set up all the gear but Fred may not turn up one night, so make sure you all understand it.

If your instrument needs tuning, do it before you go, and check it when you get there. You will have quite enough to do without trying to tune your fiddle as well. Incidentally, make sure everyone tunes to the same standard. It is no good tuning to a precise international standard 'A' if the accordion is flat.

If you are not familiar with the room, go and look at it beforehand or get there extra early. Look at such things as: if you need a power point, where is it? Will you be on a stage or on the floor? If you are on the floor, tuck into a corner and try to avoid dancers knocking your music stand or desk over (which they do frequently, and neither notice nor care). It is a good idea to always have some clothes pegs to clip the music to the stand because a couple of dancers whizzing past will cause enough draught to send your music all over the place, even if they miss the stand.

Is the lighting adequate? You all need to be able to see your music. Will there be room for you? A small stage with a few potted plants may not give you enough space. Where will you all sit and where will the caller be? Do not forget you need to be able to hear each other, and you must have two-way communication between the caller and the band.

If you are on a stage, sit as near to the front as you possibly can or the sound will not carry. It is amazing how a proscenium or arch can cut the sound right down, and even if you are amplified, sitting at the front will give you more 'presence'. You are part of the show, as well as providing music.

If you are new to this sort of thing, arrange beforehand with the caller exactly what dances are on the programme and make sure you have suitable tunes which you can play. If they insist on doing Levi Jackson's Rag, then play Sweet Georgia Brown, for example. If it is your first gig (or second or third) you cannot be expected to play any tune for any dance on demand. Make sure the caller understands this. Also tell the caller who the leader is. It is no good if the caller tells the drummer it is the "last time" if the drummer cannot tell the lead accordion.

Whether you dress up for a club evening or not is up to you, but it is certainly very important when playing for a real Dance to have some sort of 'uniform' or style. Any style will do, but if everyone turns up in totally random casual wear it doesn't look very professional. After all, if they are paying you, they deserve a decent looking band.

Observe the "no talking, no tootling" rule. Apart from being unprofessional it is very irritating to the caller and the dancers. If you tell each other jokes while the caller is explaining a tricky dance it will distract the dancers and they may even think you are making fun of them (this has happened to a very well known band!).

Have a nice bright (easy) tune ready to play in with, or you can use the music for the first dance of the evening. It is nice for the dancers and it is very good for the nerves to get started with something easy. Tell the caller to let you know when to play so that he/she will be ready to start the first dance immediately. If the caller isn't ready when you stop it makes a bit of an awkward pause, especially when you have got them all wound up and ready to go.

You can play some interval music if you like, especially if you don't have to queue for tea and biscuits (they should bring you something, but if you have to queue it is their loss). Waltzes can sound very nice and relaxing and are mostly easy to play, or some Old Tyme music - but not for teenagers - but be ready to get the second half off with a quick blast of the music for the first dance. Do not disappear in the interval, or if you must then be back in good time. If you have just nipped out to get another biscuit when the caller, the band and the dancers are all waiting to start again you will not be very popular.

On the subject of intervals, keep off the booze, or at least keep it to a very low level. You may feel like a drink to steady your nerves but it will NOT be good for your playing.

It will round off the evening very nicely if you play them out at the end, and again the timing is critical. Someone will stand up and thank the band and the caller, and it is usual for the caller to wish everyone good night and a safe journey home. At that precise moment you need to burst into your finale with something cheerful to send them on their way rejoicing. If you miss the moment and they are getting their coats on before you start to play it is not the same at all. Just play your tune two or three times through and stop. Don't go on, even if you have an admiring audience.

Another thing which is often missed by bands is that it makes a more enjoyable evening for the dancers if you look cheerful.

SMILE! If you are really terrified, then pretend to be relaxed and happy and one day you really will be. The only way to get rid of band jitters is to do lots of it until it becomes routine, but never let it become dull.

Chapter 5: Technique

The whole idea of technique is crucial to good playing. Just play a steady stream of notes at dancers and see how bored they get! If playing fast and loud is not the answer, and it isn't, then what is?

When practising the following techniques, play VERY SLOWLY so that everyone can play the notes easily without thinking about it. Only then can everyone concentrate on how the music sounds. I have been to many a workshop where we listened to a lecture on technique, only to

be launched into an impossibly fast and difficult piece of music so technique went out of the window in the sheer effort of trying to play the music at all.

CONTINUITY: by which I mean keeping the music and the dance flowing along all the time, not letting the dancers 'hang' without music, and not playing a long sustained note so that there is no beat. Some musicians stop dead before the end of an A or B section and pause before they start the next A or B. This is bad because the dancers tend to stop and wait for the next bit of music. You must carry them over smoothly from one phrase to the next, and if there are any long notes, break them up. A single instrument can fill in the extra notes very effectively because it can sound a bit 'fussy' if the whole band does it all the time. There is nothing wrong with long notes providing somebody keeps the beat and the tune going.

PHRASING is absolutely vital to good music. Take any reel or jig in a-bar sections and in each section play the first two bars as one phrase, then play the next two bars as one phrase, and finally play the last four bars as one phrase. A bit of 'Oomph' is required to start each phrase. You should notice a big difference.

This phrasing can be done by different methods:

1. by playing the first beat of each phrase more loudly, which is crude but quite effective,
2. by gliding or sliding up to the first note, which can only be done by strings or trombone. It is used in American fiddle music but is really out of place in English dancing. I don't advise using it except possibly in Squares or Contras. If you really want to use slides, perhaps you are in the wrong sort of band?
3. by something called **ANACRUSIS** which means starting slightly before the beat and building up to it, like a wave rearing up and hanging for an instant before breaking (which is what the word means). This is difficult to achieve but is extremely effective and **VERY PROFESSIONAL**. You can hear it very clearly in the Tango. Go and listen to a good Morris musician again and listen for the up-beats. That is what hurls his dancers aloft.

ANACRUSIS is tricky to explain, or even to write down in musical terms. If you take the first four bars of the tune *Blaydon Races* and sing "da-YUM te turn te turn te turn da-YUM te turn te turn, turn" with a good lift to the YUM and a very slight 'hang' or pause after it, that is as near as I can get to defining what anacrusis means. If you get the idea, try playing it like that. If you don't, then ask a good musician to demonstrate it.

LIFT is a combination of phrasing and 'dot-dashing'. For example if a reel is written as a long string of quavers, do not play it as a long string of quavers. That would be alright for Tchaikovsky's fourth symphony but not very exciting for dancing. Perhaps that is why Tchaikovsky's fourth symphony is so seldom played at Barn Dances nowadays.

Take a fast reel (i.e. a string of quavers). Divide the quavers into pairs and dot the first quaver of each pair and dash the second, i.e. play dotted quaver, semiquaver. The astonishing thing is that it immediately feels slower and more relaxed although the beat is still exactly the same. Not only can you now play fast reels 'slowly' but the dancers will feel more comfortable, even though they are still going at full tilt. You will find this enables you to play in a very easy style for hours and hours, and the music will be all the better for it. (If you play fiddle you need a **VERY** loose wrist. If you play anything else you are on your own!). Also, if you are struggling, you can play the dotted quavers and leave out the semiquavers - for now.

If you come to a block of fast notes in any tune, lean on the first one of each group and you will find it really does make it easier to play. You might think that taking extra time over the first note would lose valuable time and put you behind the others but it doesn't. There is a tendency to skimp the first note of a pair of fast notes (panic?) when really there is time to play it not only full length but indeed longer by half. If you dot-dash pairs of quavers you can think of them as crotchet-beats, which makes them much easier to handle.

You can treat Jigs in a similar way by dot-dashing the first pair of each three quavers, so each group of three becomes dotted quaver, semiquaver, quaver. For most jigs, doing this with the first triple of each bar will be a great improvement but if you play Scottish it is usual to play all the triples like this.

I don't find this necessarily makes jigs easier to play but it certainly improves the music for dancing.

NOTICE we are trying to introduce TWO things at once. We are breaking up the even notes into long-short pairs (dot-dashing), and at the same time we are trying to develop our anacrusis to pick up the dancers at the end of one phrase and throw them into the next. It takes a little time to master this (like years!), but it is what good bands are made of. The important thing is not to try it one evening, find you can't do it, and give up. Keep it in your mind all the time and little by little it will take hold and grow. You can certainly practise your anacrusis and your 'dotdashing' separately, but do try to bring them together as soon as you can.

I repeat - practise these methods VERY SLOWLY so that everyone can have a go.

Now a word about Playford, and if you said "What's that?" then the next chapter is for you.

Chapter 6: Playford.

(known as "English" in the United States of America.)

You may come across one or two Playford dances at Barn Dances, such as Holborn March, Jack's Maggot, Newcastle, and so on. These are dances which were first published in 1651 by John Playford in "The Dancing Master", and he and others (Walsh, Kynaston, Thompson, Preston, for example) published a whole series of them until about 1800. They called them "country dances" although it is obvious they were made up rather than discovered because they all have similar figures in them, and new sets of dances were published each year. These dances were performed in Bath and other fashion-able places, but the dancing was open to all ranks and classes just so long as they were reasonably well dressed. Servants could borrow their masters' cast off clothes and dance with the aristocracy. The first half of the evening would be for 'formal' dances such as the Minuets or Cotillions, and then they would quite literally let their hair down and take their hoops out and do the 'country dancing' in the second half, so Playford dancing was never serious.

Every 'Playford' dance has its own tune. The tunes are a good deal older than the dances and many of them go back to the time of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, and most of them are delightful. They vary from VERY slow to VERY fast and they need to be played at just the right speed for each dance. They must not be played in the Barn Dance style! Lots of anacrusis is needed to give a good feel for the phrasing, but certainly not the crashing beat which the average dance band tends to use. The endings are also different. Usually the tune slows down at the end, but 'turning the tune up at the end' works well for a lot of Playford tunes.

This book assumes that you want to play for Barn Dances, so I only mention all this in order that you are aware of it, and just in case you are asked to play some Playford one evening.

If you really are interested in playing for Playford dancing, the only way to learn is to go and dance Playford (find a club, don't just turn up at a Ball!) so you know what it is all about, and listen. to some really good musicians playing. There are VERY FEW bands about who play Playford well, so be very careful which ones you study!

Chapter 7: Your Music Folder.

You will soon get tired of carrying a suitcase full of books around, and rummaging through it to find a particular tune in a hurry.

The answer is to develop your own music folder and make sure everyone in the band has an identical one.

Physically this involves buying loose-leaf or lever-arch folders and a lot of plastic envelopes and putting the music into them. Like most things, this is more easily said than done!

First decide how you are going to organise it. You will need a section for reels, a section for jigs, a section for hornpipes, and so on, and you need to find sets of tunes to put on each page which go well together (and which you can all play), so when the caller says "reels", you can turn to that section and choose a page of reels immediately. Also it is a good idea to mark clearly the number of bars in each tune at the top of the sheet (or whatever your system is). Tunes which are suitable for 48 bar playing should be marked as such, and whether to play AABBAB (for a-bar B tunes), or AABB (for 16-bar B tunes).

You should devise a system for numbering the pages, so that when the caller says to the leader "6 by 32 jigs", the leader will say to the band "page x, old Rosin twice, Lady in the Boat twice, Old Rosin twice" and off you go. It is nice if you can play the first tune through once to give the dancers an idea of how it goes before the walk-through, but you need to start playing as soon as the caller announces it or the momentum will be lost. of course if you can play the first tune without any music at all, that is even better.

Don't forget that when you number the pages you will want to add more as you go, so a good method is to number all the reel pages R-1, R-2, etc. and the jigs J-1, J-2, and so on. Do think about it before you rush into it or you may wish you had started a different system, and there is a lot of work in putting a folder of music together so you don't want to do it twice.

If you have a tune which goes with a particular dance, should you file it under 'special tunes' or should you file it under 'jigs/reels'? This is why I advise thinking about it first.

It is probably not worth having a Playford/English section because there are hundreds and hundreds of Playford/English dances and you need the right music for each dance. If you are going to play a few of them frequently then have a section for those by all means, otherwise you are back to your suitcase full of books.

To be really professional, keep a sheet at the very back of your folder with "Happy Birthday to You", "Auld Lang Syne", and a few other tunes, because these may be sprung on you suddenly.

As you probably know already, photocopying from books or printed sheets is **STRICTLY ILLEGAL**, so don't do it. Any tune traditional or otherwise, can be written out by hand and then photocopied for your own personal use, but make sure that you use the correct credits ie. Title, Composer, Arranger and publisher. Should you at any time wish to publish or record your music collection then all sources should be checked and permission obtained where necessary. Advice can be obtained from Folk Music Publishers (see Google/Yahoo).

Some bands are a bit sloppy about copyright, but do be careful because if someone should catch you out the consequences could be serious. After all, if you published a book, you would not like every Tom, Dick and Harry making free copies of it.

These days you can buy an electronic metronome quite cheaply and it is well worth considering one. I have one with a dial so I can turn it instantly to the setting I want, as opposed to the cheaper ones where you have to click the speed up or down with push buttons. It has a flashing red light and it can run with or without an audible click. I mention it here because when you find a nice comfortable speed for a dance (ask the dancers or the caller) you can mark that on the music as a guide (but play a bit faster for youth clubs, and a bit slower for OAP's or slippery floors).

SPEED IN DANCING IS ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL. This is primarily the caller's responsibility, but you should be aware that if you play a little too fast the dancers will feel rushed and will not be able to get around the figures, and if you are just a bit slow the dance will drag and lose its interest so it is worth thinking about and discussing with the caller. Give the metronome to the drummer and all your speeding up problems will be over!

Chapter 8: Keys, Chords and Second Parts.

You don't have to understand this chapter to play in or to run a good band. Just concentrate on technique which is the really important thing, but a little understanding of keys does no great harm and if you want to write second parts this chapter is the one which gives you the basics (but only the very basic basics).

There are twelve major keys and twelve minor keys to choose from, and if that is not enough, each minor key has a harmonic form and a melodic form, so where shall we start?

Fortunately, the sort of music we are playing only uses about six of the major keys, and two of those are fairly uncommon, so if you get the hang of four keys you are in with a good chance.

If a tune is written with two sharps in the key signature (at the beginning), then you just play it 'in the key of two sharps'. This happens to be D major and is the one you get if you start on D and play up the scale.

The same key signature is used for B minor. (I won't stop to explain what exactly a minor scale is now or this will become an encyclopaedia, ask someone to play you one sometime if you don't know).

Now if you start on B and go up the minor scale you will find that nearly all the notes are the same as the ones in D major (which is why the key signature is the same), and the one or two notes which are different are always shown in the music with sharps against them (or naturals if it is a 'flat' key), so YOU DON'T HAVE TO KNOW whether it is D major or B minor. The giveaway is that tunes normally finish on the key-note (called the tonic), so if our tune is in D major it should end on a D but if it is in B minor it should end on a B. After a while you can spot a tune in a minor key because it has a 'sad' sound to it, whereas a tune in a major key sounds brighter and more cheerful.

Here are the names of the six most common keys:

(I will leave out the relative minor key names because they will merely clutter up the list. The minors are three semitones down from the majors, so you can work them out if you feel the need)



A Major (3 Sharps)



C Major
(No Sharps or Flats)



D Major (2 Sharps)



F Major (1 Flat)



G Major (1 Sharp)



B flat Major (2 Flats)

If you play a melody instrument such as fiddle or recorder, you may have wondered what those little letters under the music are for. If you play an accordion they tell you which little buttons to push with your left hand to make a nice noise. These are the CHORDS which some industrious person has put in to add a bit of harmony to the tune.

Some books of dance music, especially the older ones, have no chords. To add these you need to be something of a genius, and far too clever to be reading a chapter like this, so I will assume your tune has chords already.

If you take the starting note of any scale, major or minor, and go up two notes to the 'third' you will find these two notes (the first and third) harmonise. If you go up another two notes to the 'fifth' and play that with the first note you will get another harmony, and what is more, all three notes harmonise together. These are the three-note chords or triads, and are what the accordion left hand buttons play.

Some examples.

The chord of G is G, B and D.

The chord of Am (A minor) is A, C and E.

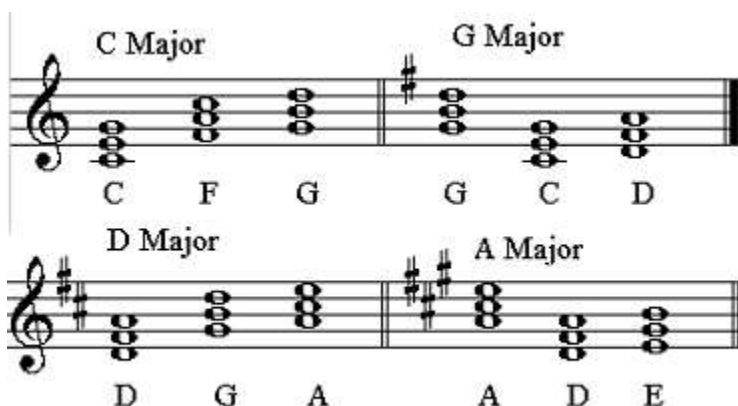
The chord of A is A, C#, E.

(C sharp because the key signature for A has F#, C# and G#).

IF THE FIRST NOTE IS ON A LINE IN THE MUSIC, THEN THE 'THIRD' IS ON THE NEXT LINE UP AND THE 'FIFTH' IS ON THE NEXT LINE UP AGAIN. The same applies to spaces. No matter how many sharps or flats there are, this is always true.

Notice that each chord consists of a first note (giving its name to the chord), the third note above and the fifth note above. In other words if you have a tune in G major with a chord of D, then the chord is the first, third and fifth starting on D, using the notes from the key of G. (D, F sharp, A). The notes therefore will fit the key of the tune. If the key signature has a C sharp in it, you will rarely find a chord used which has a C natural unless the music changes key!

Here are some examples of more commonly used keys with their associated chords.



There is just one more sort of chord and that is the seventh, written as C7 for example. This is the same chord as C but with an added seventh, so it is C, E, G and B flat, or you can think of it as B flat, C, E, G - since a seventh is one tone down from the starting note (give or take an octave). This chord tends to be used just before the end of a phrase or tune as it is rather uncomfortable to listen to and it is a big relief when it goes to the key-chord at the end.

eg. :C7=CEG + Bflat :G7=GBD + F :D7=DF#A + C :E7=EG#B + D

The person who put the chords under the tune has chosen them to harmonise with the tune, so every note in the chord harmonises with the tune, therefore you can pick anyone note out of a chord and it will harmonise with the tune, so if you pick a note from each chord in turn, (and you can go up or down an octave at will), you can make a nice second part. (I suggest you read that again very slowly).

However, avoid big jumps and apply the simple rule - if it sounds good then it is good, otherwise change it. It is quite nice to run 'counter' to the main tune, such as going up when the tune goes down, and putting in long notes when the tune has a run of short fast notes, but don't overdo it!

The simple way to make up a second part is as follows: write out the tune on very large staves (lines and spaces) and dot in all the notes of all the chords, going up or down into the next octave as required, so for a chord of C (CEG) you could dot in G, C, E, G, C, E.

Next decide what rhythm you want the second part to have because it doesn't have to be exactly the same as the main tune. Then go through picking suitable notes out of the chords to

make up a second part and chop and change around until it sounds nice. It does mean that your compositions are limited to thirds and fifths, but second parts written this way can be very successful, and for anything more advanced you really do need to dig into a lot of music theory. A second part may not sound very nice on its own, but I find as a rule that the better it does sound, the better it will be when it is played with the tune. Most second parts finish on a 'third'.

Chapter 9: Amplification.

Unless you are always going to play in small rooms you will soon need some amplification, also called P.A. (public address), for several reasons. The first and most obvious is to make the music louder.

You can place speakers down the hall to spread the sound more evenly so that people at the top are not deafened while the ones down the far end can hardly hear.

You can also achieve 'balance' so that all the instruments come over at about the same level, otherwise our tenor recorder of chapter one does not stand a chance against the accordion, and nor really does the fiddle. (That is why an orchestra has a lot of violins and not many tubas). Before starting to play for a Dance, send someone down the hall to listen to a test piece (always have your test piece ready!) and turn the level controls up or down until the balance is right.

If your amplifier has a level meter on it you can each play your test piece one at a time and set each channel to the same level using the meter (do the quietest instrument first, because you can always turn the others down).

This is quite a quick method, and it has the advantage that you don't need an extra person to go down the hall and listen. One person plays while another sets the level for that channel.

More ambitious systems have a monitor speaker facing into the band so they can hear themselves. If you have never played for a Barn Dance you would not believe the noise which can occur. We use a 100-watt system, which is not large but quite loud, and the general noise and shrieking has been so loud at times that I could only just hear the drummer and nobody else! I believe we all played the same tunes, but it was touch and go.

I do not want to get into 'what equipment to buy' here, as it is a bit beyond the scope of a small book, and new systems keep coming on to the market, so I will stick to general guide lines. As to cost, at 1990 prices you can reckon on an absolute minimum of five hundred pounds (100 watt amplifier with mixer, 4 microphones with stands, 2 speakers and all the cables), and you should really be thinking up to a thousand, and that is not for a really big system by any means.

By the time you get to buying your own P.A. you will have your own ideas about what you want. The only thing you may want to know is how much power you need, and the answer is 'an absolute minimum of a hundred watts'. Anything smaller just will not fill a hall, and even that will only take you up to a medium sized hall, not one of the really big ones. Make sure the speakers can handle the PEAK output power of the amplifier. Peak power is not the same as average or 'rms' power. When the caller shrieks into the microphone, you don't want little puffs of blue smoke to come out of the speakers followed by total silence.

Also consider the number of microphone channels you will need, and do not skimp. Will the caller want a channel, and if so can you turn off the band and leave the caller's channel on? Will

you ever want to mix in records or tapes? Will you always be happy with two speakers? If any cable or plug broke could you keep the system going for the evening? You will look a bit silly at a Dance with the P.A. out of action!

Write down on a piece of paper exactly what you want in advance or you may finish up with an inadequate system which cannot be expanded. Don't forget to invest in a long extension lead with enough output sockets on it!

There is also the question of free-standing microphones versus the ones which stick on the instrument. There are several types about and they all claim to be better than each other, but be careful that a stick-on microphone will not spoil the tone of the instrument when used without the amplifier.

You may be interested in the way we funded our P.A. system.

Before launching out, it occurred to me that if people subsequently wanted to leave the band, having paid for some of the equipment, or new people joined who had not contributed anything, it could cause problems. NO PROBLEM!

We asked various people, not necessarily our own band members, to put up money for 'shares' to which we would add a one-off bonus of ten percent. Every time the equipment is taken out, every person using it contributes one quarter of his/her fee to the 'equipment fund' which is used to pay back the 'shareholders'.

This means that whatever happens, apart from the band folding up altogether, all the people who put money in will get it back (plus ten percent) whether they play in the band or not. It makes no difference who is using the equipment, the scheme still works. New members pay a quarter of their fee like anyone else for the privilege of using the P.A.

The curious thing is that when everybody is paid off, the equipment doesn't actually belong to anyone! However, every band always wants new or bigger equipment, so I suspect the fund will run for ever, raising new loans as it pays off old ones.

Chapter 10: Money, Insurance, etc.

The financial aspects should not be overlooked. If you play in a band you will probably want to be paid, but it is unlikely to make you very rich.

To find out the going rate for a band, ask one or two folk dance club secretaries because it is they who normally book bands for their Dances and they should know. Then you can take various factors into account, such as your experience and number of players, and fix your rates, but do not quote too high OR too low or nobody will want you!

If you are asked to play 'for a charity' I would advise you to charge full rate or you can get drawn into protracted discussions about what is or is not a charity, and some members of your band may not wish to contribute to it. Charge full rate, and if your members wish to donate some or all of their fees to the charity then they can do so. It may sound a little ungenerous but it really can get very difficult otherwise, and in addition, the word gets around that you are a soft touch so everybody is suddenly running a charity.

Don't forget that all your income will be of interest to the tax man. It is very easy to put a couple of "tenners" in your pocket and forget about it, but if the Inspector of Taxes should happen to catch up with you after several years, HE will say you have earned lots of money and YOU will have to prove that you haven't. That would not be very funny. On the other hand, if you can claim all the expenses of running a band, he will probably realise you are making a loss, even if you don't, but be careful.

Apart from insuring all your instruments and amplifying equipment, don't forget public liability. If one of your speakers fell over and injured a dancer, even if it wasn't really your fault, you could find yourself being sued for an awful lot of money.

And as if all that was not enough (Why do we bother? I hear you ask!) you will find that if you are carrying instruments and/or your P.A. equipment in your car or van you will need special insurance cover, which is not cheap. Insurance companies regard musicians as a bad risk. They picture them driving home full of whisky very late on foggy nights! You are lucky if you get a cup of tea at some Dances, but they will never believe that. If you think nobody will know, you might be right until you get involved in some sort of accident and then it comes out that you were driving without insurance, because if you don't tell your insurers, they can claim that as a musician you were not covered.

It is your responsibility to tell them, not theirs to find out.

AND FINALLY:

Although this book is only little, it contains the concentrated essence of all the advice and tips gained from numerous classes and workshops and advice from other musicians plus the experience of forming and running my own band over a fair number of years.

Now, you should not drink essence in big gulps! If you reckon on a minimum of two or three years to get to the stage of playing for club evenings and some 'small' Dances you will not be far out. Then you can start to build in some technique but not all at once. Little by little is the way to do it.

Since the advice in this book has been collected from numerous bands and musicians plus personal experience, it must be pointed out that people do not all have the same views, so do not assume that dance music must be played exactly as per the book! Try all the methods, but settle on your own way of doing things. As I said, dance music is for FUN. If you are happy with method A but you don't like method B then play in the style that suits you best.

If after all this you still want to play for dancing, then I hope this book will help.

John Letheren November 1992

Further Reading:

[So You Want to be a Caller – Charles Bolton](#)

[Teaching Children Country Dancing – Pete Hendy](#)

MUSICAL NOTES:

Tune Beginnings:

Lead-in Notes

Written On the Road to Boston

Played

Dr

Detailed description: This block contains the musical notation for the lead-in notes of the tune 'On the Road to Boston'. It consists of three staves. The top staff is labeled 'Written' and shows a melodic line starting with a whole rest, followed by a sequence of eighth and quarter notes. The middle staff is labeled 'Played' and shows the same melodic line with a different rhythmic interpretation. The bottom staff is labeled 'Dr' and shows a drum pattern consisting of quarter and eighth notes. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8.

Written The Ton

Played

Detailed description: This block contains the musical notation for the lead-in notes of the tune 'The Ton'. It consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Written' and shows a melodic line starting with a whole rest, followed by a sequence of eighth and quarter notes. The bottom staff is labeled 'Played' and shows the same melodic line with a different rhythmic interpretation. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8.

Written The Matelot

Played

Detailed description: This block contains the musical notation for the lead-in notes of the tune 'The Matelot'. It consists of two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Written' and shows a melodic line starting with a whole rest, followed by a sequence of eighth and quarter notes. The bottom staff is labeled 'Played' and shows the same melodic line with a different rhythmic interpretation. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is 6/8.

Tune Endings:

Endings

Written The Ton

Written

Played

This block contains musical notation for a piece titled 'The Ton'. It features two staves: 'Written' and 'Played'. The 'Written' staff shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature. The 'Played' staff shows the same melody with some rhythmic variations and a fermata over the final note.

Written The Metalot

Written

Played

This block contains musical notation for a piece titled 'The Metalot'. It features two staves: 'Written' and 'Played'. The 'Written' staff shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature. The 'Played' staff shows the same melody with some rhythmic variations and a fermata over the final note.

Changing Tunes:

Changing Tunes with Incomplete Bars

Girl with the Blue Dress On - to - Antley's Ride

Written

Written

Play

This block contains musical notation for a piece titled 'Girl with the Blue Dress On - to - Antley's Ride'. It features two staves: 'Written' and 'Play'. The 'Written' staff shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature. The 'Play' staff shows the same melody with some rhythmic variations. The piece ends with an incomplete bar.

And back...

Antley's Ride - to - Girl with the Blue Dress On

Written

Written

Play

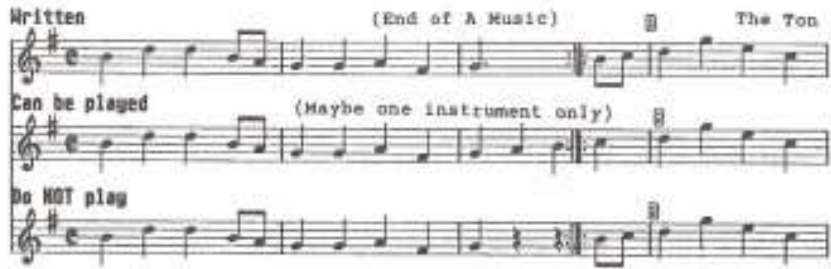
This block contains musical notation for a piece titled 'Antley's Ride - to - Girl with the Blue Dress On'. It features two staves: 'Written' and 'Play'. The 'Written' staff shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature. The 'Play' staff shows the same melody with some rhythmic variations. The piece ends with an incomplete bar.

REELS:

Reels



Continuity



JIGS:

Jigs

