**A Collection of Contra Dance Tunes played in Seattle, WA 1979-2019**

From December 1979 until the Northwest Folklife Festival in May, 2019, I (Phil Katz) have played for contra dancers in several bands based in the Seattle area. On this site I’m making available, to other musicians, the tunes played and contributed by the folks in those bands as well as the various medleys these bands have played.

I hope you enjoy them, your dancers enjoy them, and thus the traditions get carried forward that we’ve brought to this point. Some of these tunes are old enough to be “traditional”, which is to say nobody remembers who wrote them and modified them. Some were written long ago, yet preserve the tune authors and/or the musicians from whom the versions come; some of those musicians are no longer alive. And some of the tunes were written in traditional style over the recent decades by musical friends and band members, or folks to whom we’ve had the pleasure of dancing. These are folks who build the live tradition as they go.

Besides a list of [bands](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1y-XCKeqE7CWrUjGUKw7tnUPTApYkCqYS1mIbQx-mZcc) - names, dates, personnel, and instruments played, this site contains two main sources of information. First of all a folder of [tunes](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0B2lNxYWHyf8qMmFaYTR3NFBNa1k). Thus far (12/6/2020) there are about 400, and I’m adding more all the time. Secondly there is a Google spreadsheet of working two or (mostly) three-tune [medleys](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1yYpY3dgbLSC6VsE1gPOvQOVFRPaGNvRxWjFmeOoFh0w/edit#gid=0) (thus far about 1100) including the tune titles in order played, what band(s) played them, and in what years/months. These are all dance-tested medleys with reasonable transitions that made it onto a band’s set-list and got played, usually at multiple dances. (The ones that were flagged at a dance, indicating they didn’t work for some reason, I’ve endeavored not to include.)

Note: When you click on the folder of tunes, Google Drive may try to show you *a grid of thumbnails* of the tune-files’ contents, which *just might take just forever to load*; could even eventually “hang” your browser. If you see that happening, look up in the corner, below “Sign In” and to the right of “Download All”. There will be another little button with what’s supposed to be a picture of a list. Click on it, and Google Drive will *(perhaps more quickly)*  load up *a list of all the tunes*. You’ll be able to scroll through it and just click on whichever of the tunes you want to see, one at a time. (Sorry about this rigamarole, but that’s just how Google Drive is set up.)

This collection is a work in progress; there are many more tunes to be posted, and medleys to be documented. But there is enough here for it to be useful, imo, and you can check back for more.

I’d appreciate feedback from users of this site 1) on the format and usability of the site, its components, including links to other sites; 2) on errors you find in individual tunes or spellings of tune names. I’m counting on users of this free resource to participate in it as a community effort.

**How to Use the Medley Spreadsheet**

Let’s suppose you have a fave tune you’d like to play at a dance, and inspiration fails you in finding medley partners. Or you’d like to see some medleys that worked at dances, for other bands. I’d like to say these medleys are in some sort of systematic order, beyond (mostly) being in chronological order of year first played (not a very useful criterion anyway). But really you need to search for your tune using the “Find” tool, which is in the Edit pull-down menu (or shortcut is cntrl-H). So get the Find tool, type or copy-paste your tune-name in, and work your way through the spreadsheet using the “Find” button. There may be just a few medleys using your tune, or many; but stop and think a while about each one; the key changes (and major-minor ones) will be there; the band(s) that played each medley will be listed (and you can get instrumentation from the band history page); there may be comments - e.g. what sort of dances a medley is best for, emotional affect, smooth vs tightly phrased, etc. There is a lot that goes into a good medley besides just a “formula” like “go from G to D” (or the other way), or “major to minor”, or “go up (or down) the circle of fifths”. Try to figure out what the band playing that medley had in mind.

**The Format of the Tunes; abc’s**

The tunes are presented as .abc files. These are short text files that don’t look like music at all, and one doesn’t try to play from them as if they were. What you do is copy them whole into a text file on your computer or tablet, and then use a “rendering” program that makes sheet music out of them. Some rendering programs will also play the tune for you. You don’t need to be able to read this abc “language” directly; the rendering program does that for you, and makes up the sheet music. abc notation has become practically the default method for large collections of tunes online. There are many thousands of tunes (often with multiple versions) available online in abc format. For example, there is a large collection of tunes in abc format available from [JC’s abc Tune Finder](http://john-chambers.us/~jc/cgi/abc/tunefind).

Some fairly well-known traditional-style musicians have learned to write their tunes out in abc, so they can be compiled into compact archives for themselves, and often made available online. You may choose to learn how to do this “later”, but that’s not required merely to access the tunes here; all you need is a good rendering program.

**Rendering Programs**

If you’re new to abc’s, the easiest way to render an abc file into a pdf of sheet music is to go to

<https://www.montrealsession.ca/editor.php>

Which is self-explanatory except for one thing: If you want your pdf (for printing) to include all that nice comment info (notes, history, etc) then at the very top of the window (before your abc file) you should paste in %%writefields HONSZ.

I’ve also used (until 2022 when it quit working)

<http://mandolintab.net/abcconverter.php>

where I leave the parameters below the text-entry window at the defaults, except as follows:

Check the book, history, notes, and source boxes; uncheck tempo

abc version over-ride to 2.1

Graphic to svg

Once you’ve entered your abc file in the window, you have to click Submit whereupon you see a small preliminary version of your printed output, and you can fool w/ the abc’s if you don’t like what you see. Then when you’re done you click on pdf In blue under the music output) and you get a pdf to print directly or do a “save as” to wherever you want it on your computer. (Of course you’ll already have a named folder all set up to save your pdf’s into, and know how to find it again). You name the pdf in that dialog box, too (I use tunename.pdf, but it is your choice.)

After the mandolintab site broke, I began using

[editor.drawthedots.com](http://editor.drawthedots.com)

Here you print from the menu on the right. To get a pdf, do the same but before the final “print”, select "save to pdf" from dropdown menu instead of printer

I’ve also used

<https://colinhume.com/music.aspx#>

It’s good to have several places, ‘cuz one or more of these may go down for maintenance for an extended period, or quit working in the particular browser and operating system you have on your machine. (As these are all “labors of love”, upgrades to match changes in browsers or operating systems often take a while.)

If/when you want to print a pdf of your tune, you go to the directory where you’ve saved the pdf, double click on it, and the sheet music pdf will come up in the Adobe Reader that lives on your pc or mac, from which you can print a very nice hard-copy. Before you print, there’s some flexibility in the Adobe Reader to set margins, adjust the size, etc.

There are also **rendering programs that live on your pc, mac, or table**t, These have the advantage of giving more control of the fonts, size, and formatting (including 2-3 tunes to a page.) Once you get a rendering program installed, instead of fooling with the links as above, you copy/paste or download my abc file itself onto your device (yup, you better have a folder all set up to receive .abc files), give it a .abc suffix, and your rendering program should open it. Then you can fool with the size, fonts, etc, to your heart’s content. On a pc (Windows opsys) my favorite rendering program has been abc2win, a venerable (2011) old warhorse. If you’re lucky to already have it installed, imo it was the best choice, in terms of flexibility of formatting your page output, fonts, etc. But it’s just not available anymore; the site from which it used to be downloaded is taken down. And if you could get it, it wouldn’t run on Windows 10. (Worse yet, if you go looking for a site to download it from, you might get a malware site.)

The best choice currently available is EasyABC (runs on both pc and mac), which you can download at the following reputable site

<https://sourceforge.net/projects/easyabc/>

As with online rendering, you copy/paste the entire abc file into the tune conversion (bottom) window; it will immediately pop up as sheet music in the window above. If you want the auxiliary text in the abc file’s H, O, N, S, . . . fields to display on your sheet music page, then paste the following on a new line at the top of that tune conversion window:

%%writefields HONS

To print hardcopy, you don’t (!!) use the print command under the file menu; rather you use file > export > as Pdf. Save the pdf file where you can find it, then click to open it in Acrobat Reader, and print from there.

(Note: for EasyABC on a pc, you’ll need to install ghostscript if you want to print to a pdf.)

Abc’s and rendering methods may seem like a bit of trouble to learn and I suppose they may be, but learning to do so has several advantages:

* There are sites indexing and linking to multiple archives encompassing huge numbers of tunes, sometimes including dozens of attributed versions. My fave is [JC’s abc Tune Finder](http://john-chambers.us/~jc/cgi/abc/tunefind) but there are many others. This is possible because each tune, in abc format, is typically well under 1kB. The rendering to sheet music is done by the users, to suit themselves.
* The abc format has thus become a non-proprietary lingua-franca. Serious scholars of traditional tunes use it routinely, to store and communicate them.
* Some rendering programs allow you to fit and print two or three tunes on a page, allowing you to print out medleys for a particular band or gig. Usually you have to fiddle with the margins and scaling to make three fit on a page, but it is a learnable skill.

Personally my own archive of tunes is in .abc files, which I render and format (using my fave program abc2win, and on future new machines, EasyABC) and print. I can mark up my performance (paper) copy without affecting the “master”. With fellow abc users, I can send/receive abc files as email attachments; otherwise I make pdf files using the montrealsession or mandolin tab site. Some folks keep their archive of .abc files on their tablet, and use an app to render tunes right onto the tablet and read music from it. I’ve seen an app that allows you to page through a medley, of sheet music “pages’, in real time. (Maybe someone who does this will recommend their fave apps.)

**A Bit of History**

The dances at which these tunes were played have been mainly in Seattle, Renton, Tacoma, Kirkland, and Yakima, WA, with invitations sometimes to Olympia, Bellingham, Port Angeles, Port Townsend, Spokane, and North Bend, WA, Portland and Corvallis, OR, as well as Vancouver and Victoria, BC. A few of these have been band-run dances on specific nights of the month, e.g. First Saturday, Seattle; Second Saturday, Seattle; and when such dates occur a few times yearly, Fifth Saturday Seattle, Renton, Maple Valley, and finally Tacoma.

I began this period as an autoharp player, playing backup-guitar parts. But a few years later I took up melodeon (ie 2-row and later also 3-row diatonic button accordion) and transitioned to playing melody. In all of the bands I played with at least one fiddler, and at least one rhythm/chord backup player on piano and/or guitar. Several of the bands were larger (link to band list), including one or more of flute, tin whistle, sax, Anglo concertina, English concertina, mandolin, banjo, and cello.

**The Uses of Written Music (a soapbox speech)**

There is a valuable tradition of learning tunes by ear, particularly to get the “feel’ and regional style of individual tunes. However I and “most” musicians in working bands have been able to read “the dots” with greater or lesser facility. Typically a band of several musicians learn each other’s favorite tunes together, practice at home and then get together for rehearsals to play them “as a band”. Thus written music proves useful in defining band-standard versions, even as we hear, emulate, and incorporate individual musicians’ characteristic “licks”, by ear. In addition it is usual in these times for contra dance bands to play a medley of two or three tunes per dance, for a program of ten to twelve dances of an evening. That is a lot of tunes to remember (not to mention “extra” medleys held back to fit specific styles of dances chosen by the caller.) It’s also a lot of tune-transitions to nail flawlessly. Clean transitions are uplifting (to those who listen) and add energy to a dance; a “dropped” transition involving the musicians scrambling to remember a follow-on tune (having melody “go away” and probably losing uniform tempo in so doing) will have the opposite effect. Having a paper copy of tune two and three in a medley right up there on a stand is mighty useful, as is a copy of that tune one learned just three weeks ago to suit a bandmate who really-really has the hots to play it at the next upcoming dance gig.

Thus over the years, I’ve accumulated a great many tunes in written form. I’ll find out for sure when I get done posting, but it’s my guess that over the years I’ve played some 800-900 tunes for dances. Some are easier and some are harder to play, but they’re pretty danceable; if a tune doesn’t sound so in a practice of experienced dance musicians, somebody will put the kibosh on it, and it won’t make it onto an evening’s set list of medleys.