

Interview

PREFACE

At one point, it might have been possible to say that the following interview "needs no introduction." That point, however, was at least a year ago. Scott, as editor, decided to try pepping up the newsletter with some "oral history" (so to speak) interviews with some of the club's old-timers, about Western Star's early days. So he broached the idea to Larry Brown and myself, Larry to play Barbara Walters and me to play Generic Celebrity. Naturally, we loved the idea. So one morning early in the Summer of 1985, Larry had me over for breakfast (it was delicious, whatever it was), then set up his tape recorder and away we went for the next hour and a half. By the time Larry had transcribed the tape into his word-processor a few weeks later, the unedited version ran to 32 single-spaced pages. Scott went a little bit pale when I mentioned this to him, but Larry and I were enjoying the game too much to give up the project. After a few more weeks, we shaped and edited it down to its present 14-page form. By this time, Pat and Mike had taken over as editors of the newsletter and discussed the possibility of serializing it. (Actually, I think it would make a terrific mini-series someday.) Mike was enthusiastic, but made the fatal mistake of mentioning to me how much it would cost to print that much text, at which point I went a little pale. However . . . an opportunity to get our little baby elephant privately printed by an unnamed source, at no cost to the club, has come up, so here it is. "Better late than never," although in this case, that may be a matter of opinion.

Russ

INTERVIEW WITH RUSS KING

- LB: Let's see ... tape ... yeah, we're going now. One-two-three, testing. This'll pick up everything, and then I'm going to transcribe it. I have no idea how long this should be; they've given me no guidelines, so I thought we would just talk for a while....
- RK: How long's the tape?
- LB: The tape is sixty minutes, which would give us quite a bit of text. I don't mean long vocal, I mean long number of words-type for the newsletter. Normally, they say give me a thousand words.
- RK: Well, I'll try and be concise and pithy. Okay, hit me with a question.
- LB: I thought it might be interesting to talk a little ...
- RK: Oh, this says 90 minutes.
- LB: 90 minutes!
- RK: We've got 90 minutes. Oh, I don't need to be pithy.
- LB: I think one of the things we can talk about is to try and give people a little history of the club. Now, you and I are both original members of the club. We both joined at its inception. And I was wondering if you might just go back and recapture how the beginning days are different from how they are now, what it was like forming a club, and what was good about that and bad about it, and where we are now, and basically your ideas about how this club has evolved.
- RK: Well.
- LB: It's going on 3-1/2 years old.

RK: One thing's that very different is that the first two classes were dominated by people that had some prior exposure to square dancing through the old Foggy City Squares, which was characterized by a non-contemporary approach to square dancing. At Foggy City Squares then, there was no hash and no encouragement to mix up the squares and learn both positions and dance with different people. One normally danced with the same square all evening, and never stirred the bucket; this was one way of getting around the problem of how you keep track of who's dancing which role. This got to be rather stultifying after a while and Western Star, of course, spun off. But before that happened, I remember a night after I had been dancing with Foggy City a few months, when a bunch of guys from the Mile High Squares from Denver came as guests, and, so, I thought, "Oh, gosh, this'll be really interesting to dance with people from another group," and I made sure I got in a square with some of them. It was people like Bob Sutherland and Karl Jaekel and Mike Hart that I remember dancing with, and, they obviously were confused by some of the things we were doing. They threw in little styling things that I wasn't quite used to; I tried to go along but was slightly thrown off and a bit confused, and thinking why are they doing this? And they were quite startled when, after a break, we squared up with the same people. And I thought to myself that gosh, they don't know a whole lot about square dancing for people who have been square dancing this long. Then sometime over the next twenty-four hours I realized that I had the situation quite backwards and that obviously there were different approaches which we were in complete ignorance of. So, when I heard that Western Star was trying to get started at the old ACT Rehearsal Studio, I decided to check it out and see what was going on. Did you ever go there?

LB: Yes, a couple of times.

RK: The five founders were Scott, Ron Douglass, Agnes, Roger Perry and Dennis Ficken, and four of them were on the [old] Foggy City Squares Exhibition Team at the time and there had been one of the eternal political rifts that were going on then....

LB: Were you in Foggy City when you joined Western Star?

RK: Oh, yeah.

LB: I don't remember you from Foggy City. Do you remember me?

RK: I remember you vaguely, but we're talking classes of over 100 people. You could go for a year without getting to know everybody which was another thing that got to be kind of frustrating. Anyway, a couple of months after Western Star started its first real class in the YMCA lobby, Brian Porcher talked Mark and me into going to the '82 Reno Rodeo, which turned out to be a watershed time for gay square dancing. It was the first time that several of the clubs were all together at the same time and really connected. There was a little bit of exhibition stuff planned for Saturday morning, but that was about it for square dancing. And then there was a big Country Dance Hoedown with, I don't know, Linda Lane and the Western Electric, or somebody like that, that night. But what we wanted to do was square dance with each other, so "Happy" New Year set up his equipment in the parking lot. We're talking about an underlit parking lot, potholed everywhere, portable commodes and the attendant odors not too far away and it was, of course, quite wonderful. There were about three or four squares of us tagging in and out.

LB: I remember this. I remember hearing all of this at Skip's right after you people got back. There was this big rumor going on one night at Skip's right after the Rodeo in which a lot of people went out and were dancing in the parking lot.

RK: So we danced. Western Star was about half-way through our first class at the time; if I recall, our first class started late May of '82 and we finished in September. And I remember that the fact that I was taking the Western Star class helped me through a lot of the stuff because people who had only been dancing with Foggy City didn't know, for example, what a Flutter Wheel was yet. I mean, at Foggy City we had done a Tea Cup Chain, but we hadn't done Flutter Wheel. The teaching order at that time didn't have any resemblance to the designated levels. Whereas the gay clubs in other areas were started by people who had had a connection with the straight Callerlab clubs and therefore tended to go by those levels.

LB: Let's go back for a minute to the beginning of Western Star when we were learning with Bill Klein.

RK: Yah.

LB: In the foyer outside of where we are now.

RK: Oh, yes. We had horrible acoustics!

LB: Yah, but did you find -- I thought that was all very exciting. I felt like we were making it up as we were going along.

RK: Making what up?

LB: Just the whole organization, the whole club structure, how we were going to teach it, who was going to teach it, when we were going to meet, I mean, there was nothing very codified in those early days. There was a real excitement over the club being rather small and there wasn't much stability, I grant you, but I sensed a real level of excitement. Perhaps because it was all new.

RK: Well, we were learning new material. We were already, I think, enthusiastic about square dancing, but it was like, okay, now we're learning together a whole different aspect of it. We had a goal to find out about the straight world of square dancing; we'd gotten the show-biz disco adaptation of square dancing that Skip pushed, but we were ready for a whole different approach. And, of course, Bill Klein came along ...

LB: Yes, now how do you feel about Bill Klein as compared with, oh, some of our later instructors like Phil and -- I mean I thought Bill was pretty outrageous.

RK: Well, of course, Bill was outrageous. I am certainly not going to, especially for publication, get into dissecting the various strengths and, particularly, weaknesses, of our various instructors over the years. I am not that stupid.

LB: But, see, the thing is that I thought Bill brought a certain kind of ...

RK: Mad leather charm ...

LB: Well, I was going to say gay sensibility to gay square dance, that probably hasn't been duplicated, although I must say that Phil on certain costume occasions has risen beautifully to the moment.

RK: I guess that most people reading this won't know a whole lot about Bill Klein, I mean, I don't think he's square danced, let alone square danced with us, for two or three years. Some day I want him to sign a diploma for me as my teacher, because he was the person who actually made me a Callerlab Mainstream dancer. I remember, of course, he danced everything challenge style; you scarcely touched. I really disliked the way he never looked at you. (Here I am going on about people's weaknesses and I said I wouldn't. For shame.) But, he had a tremendous depth of knowledge, both of the calls from all positions and how things were done in the straight world, and he would communicate this to us. And, of course, he was doing it all for free. We couldn't afford to pay anyone at this time and he was doing it because, I guess he had philosophical objections to how Foggy City Squares was run at that time and saw that we were trying to find out more about the broader square dance world and approved of this even though he, unfortunately, didn't have the patience to get much pleasure from dancing with relatively inexperienced klutzes such as ourselves. I remember him being quite sarcastic with me once when I had proceeded to screw up Recycle from the "half-sashay" position three or four times. I was virtually on the point of blowing up and cussing him out and leaving never to come back and I kept telling myself, no, no, no, I need this technical knowledge. I will bite my tongue. I will keep my mouth shut and I will learn.

LB: So, here we are, I mean, I'm just trying to paint a picture of what this early square dance entity was like. And where it is now.

RK: We had two or three squares, we were in the lobby instead of the theatre.

LB: We didn't have rules or bylaws.

RK: We had the Callofon.

LB: We had one piece of equipment. We had the Callofon.

RK: We had some records. A limited supply. Mostly we had singing calls. I don't think we had many hash records at that point. So, most of our APD was on the walkthrough and being encouraged to learn both roles, but we had relatively little hash material to actually put you in both positions and, of course, Bill Klein was not a caller, so all he would do was the walkthroughs and lectures on what the straight square dance world was like and not being excessively rambunctious, etc., etc., etc.

LB: Now, you go the club today and it's very highly structured.

RK: We've learned a lot from trial and error. For example, with the first class or two, we just graduated to club night and you immediately learned Plus. That was how we kept interest, you just continued teaching more calls, but, of course, every time you graduate another Mainstream class you don't really want to turn club night into a class type experience; that gets very old very fast for the people who have already learned Plus and for the newer people it means, that since the older people are kind of bored with it, they're going to rush through it at a pace that's simply not realistic to be learning the material for the first time. So, it was like either you fried the brains of the new graduates or you bored the old timers and it just wasn't working. I was having a conversation with Scott last week, and he happened to mention in passing that -- he used the phrase club night as the central -- the center of the club. You know, the pivot point, etc. And I pointed out to him that that was quite interesting because in the old days, club night tended to be sort of a minor fiasco, and, if the club had depended on the quality of club night for its health and continuance, we would have gone down the toilet a couple of years ago. What initially kept us going was both the sense of discovery that we all had and the social bonding that we had as a group, as a smallish group that was all going through this together. And, even if club Nite was sort of a disaster, we'd usually be doing things in groups over the weekend or doing other special type of dance, or whatever, that were very positive experiences. And, of course, Western Star was, as far as I can tell, the first gay club in the Bay Area that really pushed field trips to other groups or going out to the straight community and dancing with them. Especially pushing us to get going to the Roundup. We were the first gay club to actually have a significant number of members go to the Roundup,

although Midnight Squares also did this when they got going. I think some people from Western Star went and observed it back in '82.

LB: We did. There were a bunch of us that went and we couldn't believe our eyes.

RK: So that sort of set up a goal to work towards for the next year.

LB: Well, you see, Bill Klein in those early years, in the beginning, Bill would say things like, well, gay square dancing is not an end in itself. You're just learning how to square dance so you can go out and learn how to dance with other clubs. He said that our club may continue on, but eventually you're going to want to broaden and dance with other clubs. I always thought that was a shocking thing for me, because I never really enjoyed dancing with other clubs as much as I have with my own.

RK: Yeah.

LB: And I probably won't. I mean, even as much as I enjoy dancing at the higher levels, I still would rather be with a small group of people I really feel comfortable with.

RK: Well, I remember, though, Round Up '84. Gertrude Khuner was my partner for most of the weekend. Actually she and I danced half-sashayed a lot of the time, so there was this little bird-like grandmother promenading me around. In fact, there's a lot of straight people that, if they're comfortable at a certain level, to make it more fun and challenging, they'll switch roles just for the hell of it, and if you're in a square with people that can do that, nobody ...

LB: And you encountered no resistance at all to that?

RK: No, but it was usually we would do it when we knew at least one or two other couples in the square. So, of course, the fourth goes with the flow.

LB: Right. Would you have encountered trouble if you think you had been dancing with a man? Would that have been problematic?

RK: Generally, it depends on the level. At Advanced Level, they generally would rather dance with a male couple than sit out because there aren't enough couples.

LB: Right, not dance. Right.

RK: So, it's pretty much acceptable if it's necessary to complete a square, whereas if there are women sitting out, they will not be so pleased about it.

LB: Okay.

RK: At Basic and Mainstream and even Plus, sometimes the dancers aren't good enough to really cue just by position. They need the crinolines, and without that, they'll break down and you'll spend half the time standing around and so that's not much fun. But, there was something I was building towards that I want to insert, from Round Up '84. Getting back to what we were talking about -- feeling more comfortable dancing with your own club -- my favorite tip was the last tip Saturday nite when we squared up with an all male and all female square. I had a great sense of finally being myself and suddenly aware to what extent I had been role playing all day. I mean, I was there as a person from a gay club and a lot of people there knew we were a gay club and were actually rather pleased by our level of dancing and so they were sort of accepting, but at the same time, I was dancing with a woman, even when I was dancing the women's part, I had a woman as my partner dancing the man's part. And, when we squared up all together in the male and female squares, I was suddenly aware of the extent to which I had not been myself until then. I was able to present only one aspect of myself and, of course, I like to dance in a rather crazy, uninhibited manner when I can get away with it. And it was great fun, really swinging the other men and, uh, I think people watching us sort of got a kick out of it.

LB: Some of them did.

RK: A couple of people looked the other way.

LB: Some of 'em really laughed and clapped. What struck me about '84 that was so interesting was that that happened almost spontaneously. We all just squared up and danced. Whereas the year before, in '83, there was a lot of tension about whether or not there should be an all male square. Would we be flaunting it? And, there was just far more of a resistance. I remember, particularly, they said would you square up in an all male square and I said no, I wouldn't. I felt it was just too provocative. Whereas the next year, sure, why not. It was like we had really come of age. I want to

steer this towards what it means to be a gay club. I've heard some people say that Western Star is a gay club because basically it does everything a straight club does only, there are a lot of drag queens running around on certain nights. I mean, the main flavor of our gay identity comes from not assuming sex-identified roles and also being allowed to camp it up and come in drag.

RK: The advantage to learning both roles is that it means you get to dance with anybody on the floor regardless of which part they do. You don't get in the frustrating position of wanting to dance with somebody and you both dance the same role. Is there any more powerful situation under the sun? I don't know, but I doubt it. That isn't what is particular to the club though, there are some straight clubs where people learn both roles, especially clubs that are fairly flexible and have an excess of men or women. Stanford's club apparently has an excess of men. Some of the other straight clubs have an excess of women. And a lot of people learn both parts. No big deal. So that really is peripheral to our identity as a gay club.

LB: So what makes our club gay? Is it gay?

RK: Oh, yeah. And also we, of course, are open to straight people that feel comfortable dancing with us.

LB: Is it gay enough?

RK: Sure, for a social club. We're here primarily to socialize with other gay people or with straight people that feel really relaxed and supportive of gay people. And because we enjoy square dancing. Essentially we're a very eclectic club. Aside from being gay and enjoying square dancing, there really isn't that much of a common denominator. And that's good. It's a place where you can relax, have fun and be yourself. The club's zeitgeist is quite non-conformist. If there's any thread that runs through the club membership it's that we tend to be very individualistic and don't really get too huffy if somebody's coming out from left field a lot of the time. There really is no pressure to conform. And, God knows, I tend to push that in the way I dance.

LB: Speaking about you personally, has this club filled a void in your personal life? I get the impression that you've put so much time and energy into square dancing that it's kind of become a quasi-lover to you? Is there room enough for you to fall in love and have a romantic life outside of your clogging and your square dancing and your teaching? Has it in effect really assumed . . .

RK: Well, let's put it this way. If I get involved with somebody, he will either have to be a square dancer, be willing to learn or be willing to spend three or four nights a week on his own. If I got seriously involved with somebody, I might cut back a little bit in square dancing, but I certainly wouldn't cut it out of my life to please somebody else. We're talking basic questions of identity and maintaining your identity in a relationship and that means not compromising too much. Anyway.

LB: So what you're saying is that your square dance activities form a very important part of your identity.

RK: Looking back on things that I've been involved with before -- I was heavily involved with the Berkeley Shakespeare Festival during its first three seasons because my ex-lover was an actor with them, and then I was also involved with the Oakland Lesbian/Gay Rights Organization. With that group, we were involved in a political action task, but for the majority of the people in the group we were partly doing it for social reasons. I think that was really bad, because when you have a specific political task out there, you want to accomplish it and therefore go out of existence. And, if on some level, you want the group to continue for social reasons, I . . .

LB: The political task is not going to get done . . .

RK: Yes, and it never did! Finally, the ordinance did get passed, but it was by a whole 'nother group.

LB: In spite of you!

RK: Yes.

LB: That's wonderful.

RK: The nice things about square dancing is it does have its political side. I think when we square dance on the ferry to Angel Island, when we go out in public, in a straight context (and the thing about Western Star is that we've never shied away from doing it in public -- we've done it in airport terminals and on ferry landings, this, that and the other), I think that accomplishes more in terms of overturning people's expectations of how gay people socialize than all the pamphlets and petitions that you can work on for years. It really forces people to confront a positive gay social reality that they didn't know. Maybe they're tickled, I mean some people are really quite supportive when they see us doing that. Some people are shocked, but as they say "fuck 'em if they can't take a joke."

LB: Okay. Finally, let's talk about why there are four square dance clubs in the bay area.

RK: Four gay clubs?

LB: Four gay clubs!*

RK: Primarily gay clubs.

LB: Let me put the question to you in another way. Somebody said to me recently, if it weren't for all the ego types involved behind certain of the various clubs, we could get by with one or two clubs. Do you believe that's true?

RK: I don't think that's true.

LB: The other statement going along with that is do you believe that square dancing has a certain momentum that was faddish and is starting to fade? That there's going to be a shakeout in the clubs and that there's not enough bodies out there for four clubs to keep going?

*We were referring to WSD, Foggy City Dancers, Bay City Ramblers and Midnight Squares, Capitol City Squares being somewhat beyond the immediate bay area and El Camino Reelers not having yet gotten beyond the planning stage.

RK: Time will tell. Okay, there's only three Mainstream clubs. Midnight Squares is a whole separate issue because it's at the advanced level. And none of the three Mainstream and Plus level clubs can accommodate three full levels of Callerlab dancing. Midnight Squares is there as a gay group of people that have been dancing for a while and really want to learn lots and lots of calls beyond what they can get out of the three other clubs and virtually everybody that is active with Midnight Squares is also active with Western Star or Foggy City. So, that's a whole separate issue. People only have so many nights a week, but nevertheless that is not in any way competing with what people are getting out of their Mainstream/Plus level clubs. So, what we're talking about is three Mainstream level clubs in the city. I think for clubs to work socially, you don't want them to get too big. I find at Western Star, the nights I tend to enjoy things are when we don't really go above four squares. It's nice when we get up to six squares, which we sometimes do when we have a particularly hot caller, but I always feel by the end of the evening that there's at least a half-dozen people that I never danced with all evening that I enjoy dancing with. You don't want to get too many bodies there on club night because it tends to defeat the social purpose. The urban cowboy thing that was around a few years back I think got a lot of people interested, without really knowing what they were getting into, but now both Western Star and Foggy City have a fairly hardcore group of people who are committed to their club and are comfortable with their club's approach and will see that they can continue at a level of membership that will at least pay the bills without any serious problems.

LB: I have a couple of Barbara Walter questions for you.

RK: Yes, Barbara?

LB: I would just like you to tell everyone in our most interested readership something about you that probably none of us know. We're looking for some little tidbit of interest, something along the order that you love to keep and raise pet frogs, or something. Something that will really elucidate your personality in a way that will give us a whole new angle on who Russ King really is. We want to get to know the man.

RK: Barbara Walters is not my favorite television interviewer.

LB: Alright. This is a Jane Pauley question.

RK: Jane Pauley. Gosh. What a conversation stopper that approach is. I think I will tell an anecdote about Martha Graham which is apropos to the situation. When her mother died, she burned her letters to her mother (which her mother had saved and which were very personal) because she had a horror of some undergraduate dissecting her guts later on. She thought her work ought to speak for itself. I think people probably know as much about me through my dancing and my socializing and quiet evenings over coffee afterwards as I choose to communicate. Beyond that is nobody's business.

LB: Well, you can't say I didn't try.

RK: No, no, okay. Next.

LB: Well, just finally, there is a part of me since I am not that involved -- I don't know if we will publish this or not -- since I am not involved that much any more on the club night per se, feels like I am missing out on what the main line of dish is. We went through a period in our club where there was quite a lot of underground activity and various sects doing this and that -- strip poker games on the side. There was always enough ...

RK: Strip poker games??? I never heard about that! Of course, I was off in Berkeley during the early stages and probably missed out sometimes.

LB: Oh, no, I used to hear [CENSORED]

RK: Oh, tell me, tell me.

LB: Well, I was just wondering if there's anything that the club ...

RK: You realize [CENSORED] might get a copy of this newsletter. Keep it clean.

LB: I'm just wondering if there's any kind of innocent gossip that will put a nice fresh smile on the face of the club that you might want to share with us. Brighten our day.

RK:

Larry, I think if that's what you want, you can pay
your dues and join us on club night on a regular basis.

LB:

Cut!





W.S.D. IN DEC. '82