

John Sybalsky: Memories

Various

Editor's Note--John Sybalsky passed away suddenly on May 25, 2009, just as this issue of the Call Sheet was going to press. Although not a GCA member himself, John had a profound and positive influence on an entire generation of West Coast GCA callers, as well as the A&C community in general. In that context, I thought it appropriate to publish some of the memories people were willing to share. To say that John will be missed is an understatement. His loss leaves a painful void in the square dance calling community. At the request of John's family, Clark Baker has set up a tribute web page with more information about John at <http://tinyurl.com/sybalsky>

Debbie Ceder: John was a big burly bear of a man, a fabulous caller, and a great friend. He accompanied me to my first leather shop where I purchased my corset bustier. He conveyed more with a grunt and a shrug than most people do in a lecture. I thrilled every time I saw him, and his ear-to-ear Cheshire cat grin makes me smile to this day. He will be sorely missed.

Frank Yellin: John was famous for putting strong, but not yet at-level dancers into a square and cuing them through their parts while keeping the dancing flowing. I was certainly the "victim" of this on many occasions. I also remember this backfiring. He once cued an extremely talented but blind C2 dancer: "Charlotte, follow Frank—wait, what am I saying?"

Alan Hirsch: John was a bear of a man in all the good connotations of the term. He was friendly with a good sense of humor and always

supportive of the dancers who wanted to learn unusual square dance sequences. I believe I attended only two dance weekends where he called but at each one, once I got over the initial shock of dancing from left-handed formations, his choreography was impeccable and delivered with aplomb. I will always remember him for his left-handed calling and the fun

we had dancing everything reversed from what we were accustomed to.



Andy Shore: I first started dancing to John in late 1987 or 1988 when Randy and I tried out the Stanford Quads and kept coming back.

Our first night was humbling, but it made me realize that I didn't really know Plus, but wanted to be able to smoothly dance to John's calling.

Even though I wasn't calling yet, he made an impression with great flow, interesting and challenging choreography, and a dry, matter-of-fact delivery style that resonated with me.

Once I started calling in 1989, John became a mentor and was a great resource to have around and was a major influence on my calling style. I remember poring through my copy of "The Big Five" to find the get outs that were listed under various FASRs with some of the calls.

When I went to SuperSchool caller school in 1990, Bill Peters realized that I was a Sybalsky-influenced dancer and caller and instantly took a shine to me. Within a few years, John (and the rest of the Quads) felt confident enough about my calling that he occasionally asked me to be his fill-in when he was unavailable.

Randy and I learned to dance C1 from John in a Top Cats class. I also took C2 classes from him (twice!), but it's not John's fault that I'm not a competent C2 dancer.

John encouraged me to attend CALLERLAB conventions and was one of the early, welcoming advocates of GCA member participation in CALLERLAB.

One of my fondest memories is the special Friday night C1 dance that John and I co-called once in the South bay. We filled a large school gymnasium and we both had a blast calling for an enthusiastic crowd.

Michael Maltenfort: My favorite memory of John: his explanation of how to *Trail Off*. "On *Peel Off*," he told us, "you go away from the center of your formation. Just like you peel a banana. For *Trail Off*, you go across the center." And then he deadpanned, "...like you trail a banana." When I called *Peel Off* this week, I heard "like a banana!" from the floor, a nice tribute to John.

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John Sybalsky, continued.

Charlie Robertson: My first memories of John were back in the late 80's. My girlfriend's parents were very involved in PACE (Pacific Association of Challenge Enthusiasts). Each year the PACE Extravaganza was held in Oxnard, California, and John was a regular attendee. John was very well known in the Challenge world and I was a very young caller. Consequently, I was more than a little nervous to meet him. When I finally worked up the nerve to say "hi" I was greeted with "hi back". I found John to be very nice, intelligent, and willing to answer my questions. -- *Charlie Robertson*

Barry Leiba: I first met John in the early 1990s, and got to know him more when a friend suggested that I go to a dance where, as he put it, John "Check Your Right Hand at the Door" Sybalsky was calling.

John was known as an eccentric caller, in a fun sense. He was known for heavy use of left-handed formations, challenging those not accustomed to that, and keeping everyone alert and thinking. He would call something that might have seemed run-of-the-mill, and a dancer would avert a breakdown by alerting his square, "It's left!" and John would quietly respond, "Of course it's left."

The eccentricity extended to his selection of music as well. John actively sought funny, unusual, and just downright weird music to use. We would groan when he'd put on the "Chipmunk song", or the Teletubbies theme, knowing that they would make us laugh while we danced, but get stuck in our brains hopelessly afterward. My favourite of his odd selections was

Sue Keller's excellent ragtime arrangement of Beethoven's "Für Elise", which she calls "Furry Lisa".

And what he'd say on the microphone...During a recorded session, if the caller corrects an error you've made, you're said to be "on the tape." "Bill, you should be behind Jane." "Turn around, Karen." "No, Roger, the other left."

With John, nearly everyone was on the tape at one time or another, often not because of mistakes, but for other reasons — John always had something to say.

He was one of those callers who didn't just give instructions from the stage, but became part of every square, in a way. John was sarcastic in just the right manner, and had a quick wit and a great sense of humor that I particularly appreciated.

Len Christiansen: My favorite memory of John is the weird and wacky music he used to use. One of my personal favorites was "The Chicken Yodel".

Allan Hurst: John wasn't always the nicest person behind the mic, but he was always incredibly intelligent.

He could effortlessly sight-call the most astonishingly complex stuff I've ever witnessed. If he was in a playful mood, he was capable of speaking a single call that could take several *minutes* to parse for even the most highly skilled of dancers.

Very appropriately, John's license plate read: "I CALL C4".

The first time I danced to him, which would have been at least twelve years ago, he called me out on-mic several times for mistakes I made. Some of my friends were

incensed. They were surprised when I said I don't care, I'd dance to him again.

--But why would you dance to someone so abusive on-mic?

My response: *Because I just learned more about Advanced dancing from him in 15 minutes than I've learned in the past year.*

--But why didn't you argue with him?

My voice took on a highly practical tone: *Because (1) he was right, and (2) he literally wrote the book on square dancing (The Big Five). Why would I argue with someone like that?*

However, I don't want to give the impression that John was always mean-spirited on-mic. I once saw him call a Basic/Main-stream intro night (or it may have been a club night) at Foggy City Dancers in which he was warm and supportive and, "even" at Basic, still a total wizard. One of my very few lost possessions for which I mourn is my tape of him calling that night; it vanished during a move before I could transcribe it for analysis.

He never stopped learning, either. A few months before his death, he set up a caller school so he could earn hours towards a CALLERLAB Coach certification.

John served on more committees and in more positions in CALLERLAB than I can count. He called for the Stanford Quads and clubs all over the Bay Area.

So to me, that's John in a nutshell: Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant. And *always* right, even when calling lefts.



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