



Lawrence White

## The Flurry Roots Band: A History of the Festival Finale

*What appears to be a spontaneous jamming session for the Festival's last dance is actually a carefully planned musical event that has evolved over time.*

Feeding the dance and music community, keeping traditions alive, involving people rather than simply delivering a product — that's what the Flurry has always been about. The Flurry Roots Band does all that, plus it's a living connection to the early days of the festival. This band, which closes out the festival in the huge Paul Rosenberg Dance Hall each year, combines older players (tradition bearers) and tunes from the early years with new(er) young(er) players, new tunes, and new energy — as when Andrew VanNorstrand switches from rhythm guitar to a wild (but well-phrased) solo break. What other festival ends with a hot multi-generational band whose ages span more than 60 years?

At the end of the Flurry, we all need a big emotional boost — some extra energy to carry home. Twenty years ago, just gathering a throng of musicians was enough to deliver high energy to the dancers, even if the throng mostly played tunes in unison. Today, dancers expect more than a mob, they want musicians who do something with the tunes. When the final band was as big as the stage allowed, the amount of mix-it-up, on-the-fly combinations and harmonies was minimal. Now that the Roots Band is smaller, more musical interaction and arranging happens.

**The Early Years** Flurry founder Paul Rosenberg doesn't remember who performed in the first Roots Band. Paul does remember where he got the idea for how to end the festival, though. "I had attended so many David Kaynor dances at Greenfield during the 1980s and witnessed the great sound, fun, fellowship, excitement, of a lot of good musicians jamming. ...Also my first Ashokan Northern Week [held near Woodstock, NY] I believe was 1988, and the jamming at the evening dance jams and final Sunday

afternoon was really sizzling....I wanted to have that sound at the Flurry."

When Paul first floated the idea of a winter dance event, both David Kaynor and Bill Matthiesen provided a lot of support. David recollects, "Paul and I used to toss a lot of ideas around. I can't remember specifics. But we both had what I recall were really nice visions for the experiences people would share. We were idealistic."

The program from the second Flurry is a one-page sheet with no festival title, just the date—"Feb. 25 & 26, 1989"—and a map of the Farnsworth Middle School at the top. The list of musicians was short; the band members for the last set were Jay Ungar, Molly Mason, Pete Jung, Bill Tomczak, George Wilson, Nick Hawes, and Mary Cay Brass. By 1993, the last session is called Contra Dance Party; listed are callers D. Kaynor, T. Grant, C. Butcher, P. Rosenberg, K. Wedderburn, J. Baker, T. Parkes, "and a host of musicians."

"The Saturday night and Sunday afternoon contra parties were absolutely incredible music-making moments in the first several years," Paul recalls. "In fact, almost every year, from 1989 at least till we moved to Saratoga in '94, I had one or two crying episodes during one of those jams. The music was so incredibly passionate, powerful, moving, that I let my emotions overcome me. I just could not believe how incredible the music could be!"

Participation was by invitation for the first few years, Paul remembers; it was one big group with a rotation of piano players. But others showed up to sit in. "As I recall, the early versions of the 'parties' were pretty open," says David, "I think just about anybody could play." At some point in the mid-1990s, Paul asked him to "organize" the parties, "the goal being to create some functional subgroups of the crowd of musicians. I had what I thought were good ideas, but they proved to be otherwise," says David. "Later, Stuart [Kenney] ran them and things seemed to go pretty well."



Fiddlers extraordinaire Jay Ungar, Cedar Stanistreet, John Kirk, and Eric Buddington generate harmonic energy in the 2009 Roots Band.



**From Kaynor to Kenney** Stuart Kenney first came to the Flurry in 1991 with the Greenfield Dance Band. He got involved in organizing the musicians for the final dance session a few years later. Stuart tried quick changes between several small groups, different mixes and matches of the big-name bands. “I ran the final dance big jam band for six years,” he explains. “Paul approached me to help facilitate a smoother, more organized pinnacle for the last dance of the weekend. I put in my energy to help develop his vision. This was not always an easy task with all of the personalities involved. I brought in Will Russell for sound; he has been the main hall sound guy since.” Stuart notes that providing good-quality sound for the final dance jam had proved difficult, but “Will always made it go smoothly.” Stuart always had Paul call the festival’s final contra, which “featured Paul as the founding organizer and gave the community a chance to acknowledge him.”



Bob McQuillen  
Photo: Lawrence White

Stuart may have started the tradition of using Bob McQuillen’s tune for the last waltz. “I don’t think we started [playing] Amelia until McQuillen started coming, about 7 to 10 years ago,” recalls Paul. (Tunesmith and piano player Bob McQuillen was first listed in the 2002 Flurry program.) “Amelia had been played on and off over the years because it is both a beautiful and well-known waltz,” Stuart explains. “When I organized the final dance, I made

sure it was the final waltz. I made a point to honor Bob McQuillen for his years of service to the community — it seemed appropriate to have him play piano for it each year because he is such a living legend.”

**Recent Refinements** When I took over organizing the Roots Band a few years back I called up many of the musicians who had played the final dance, which revealed some surprises. For one, a lot of the regulars were reluctant participants. Not all musicians like being pulled away from their carefully crafted and rehearsed sets. Playing with new folks means no comfortable routines to fall back on. The Roots Band demands listening and sharing, sitting out at times, and switching gears at a few seconds’ notice in response to the caller, or an idea thrown out by one of the players, or a surge of energy on the dance floor. Jazz players take such challenges for granted, but it’s important to keep these skills alive in the contra community as well. It’s been a challenge to come up with a structure that promotes



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mixing and musical conversations; rotating duos for part of each medley seems to work well. Set lists created in advance make it more fun for the musicians. The contra repertoire has gotten so huge that finding common tunes takes a lot of effort; twenty years ago the range of tunes in the contra community was much smaller!

The Flurry features more types of dance and music now, and it attracts a much wider audience. In the early days, many if not most attendees were experienced contra dancers. Now in the Paul Rosenberg Hall the crowd includes people who have never danced a contra — swing dancers, tango dancers, even non dancers who wander in, especially as other activities wind down. By Sunday afternoon, even the diehard contra dancers are a bit brain-dead. Well-phrased music (with a more traditional structure) helps. It steers tired dancers through the figures, so they stay “in the zone” with minimal brain cells — and the caller doesn’t have to call the whole time. (Any caller can tell you that a dance that’s fabulous earlier in the weekend can fall apart on Sunday afternoon.) Tired dancers also need energy from their musicians—a good rhythm section is essential.

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**At a recent Flurry**, I passed one of the many huddles of musicians in the hallway. They had no audience but themselves, yet their music was of such beauty that I stopped, dumbstruck. Strings were expertly playing a jaunty jig, and a bass saxophonist was matching them at their own tune, note for note, with nuanced virtuosity. The richness of their combination left me enraptured. This, for me, represents the musical side of the Flurry: playing for love and beauty. My hat is off to all of the skilled, generous, and good-natured musicians who play there. Thank you! Dan Shawhan

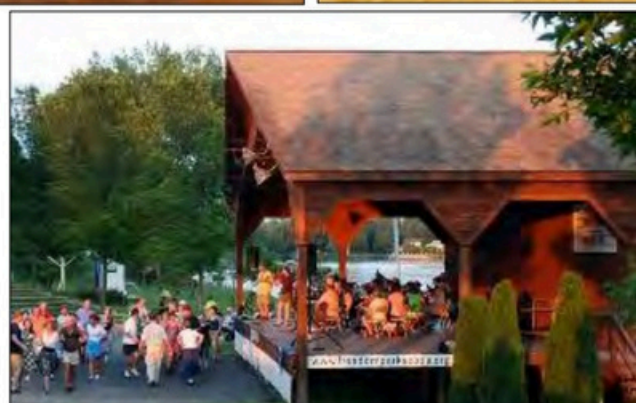
**My first Flurry** was at the Westmere Elementary School (the very first Flurry!). I didn’t live in the area at the time, but I was able to get a place to stay with a local dancer. My friends and I came with sleeping bags, danced all day and into the night, then slept on her living room floor. It was very snowy, so we had to dig out the next morning. I’ve been coming ever since! Bonnie Terry



### Roots Band, cont.

Like the rest of the Flurry, the Roots Band keeps traditions alive while cultivating innovation. This year two guys who've been attending the Flurry forever came up to the stage at the end with tears in their eyes. Each said the last session was the high point of the festival. After playing that session, Bob McQuillen wrote me, "I can't thank you enough for the wonderful experience I just had at the Flurry. It was the best time I ever had there, and the last set on the big stage was the best thing I've ever had happen to me. It was so much fun."

**The Finale of the Finale** For many years, playing in the Roots Band meant playing Chorus Jig. Paul Rosenberg loved calling the dance that goes with this tune as the next-to-last dance at the Flurry. (It became the last dance after the move to Saratoga.) In the early years at the middle school, when everyone in the room was a contra dancer, it was a much-loved tradition. In recent years, the length of the contra lines in the Rosenberg Hall and the participation of non-contra dancers in the weekend's final dance often led to tangled lines in the crowded middle sets and chaos in the side sets, leaving more than a few dancers frustrated rather than elated. For the past two years, Paul has ended the Flurry by calling another classic: The Baby Rose, a great David Kaynor dance. This year, Chorus Jig was the finale of the next-to-last session, as David Millstone called it to end his "chestnuts" session. Will this become a new tradition? 🌀



**New DFO Affiliate dance series** include the Bennington, VT, Community Contradance (top left), Albany Lindy & Blues Exchange and the Capital English Country Dances.

**Outreach events in 2011** included an introductory contradance at SUNY Albany (top right) and the **DFO Megaband** playing for a free contradance at Scotia's Freedom Park (above). The **Youth Committee** also sponsored a two-day dance residency at Saddlewood Elementary School in Colonie, including an evening dance event with parents.

## ADIRONDACK DANCE WEEKEND SILVER BAY YMCA, LAKE GEORGE SEPT. 21-23, 2012



### DANCE EVENTS FOR THE DFO COMMUNITY

More info at [www.danceflurry.org](http://www.danceflurry.org)

Albany Contradances!

Albany Lindy & Blues Exchange

Bennington Community Contradance

Buhrmaster Barn Contra Dance (Colonie)

Capital English Country Dancers (Albany)

Capital Swing (Albany)

Diamond Dance (Saratoga Springs)

Family Dances (Delmar and Albany)

Glens Falls Contra Dance

Homespun Barn Dances (Albany)

Hubbard Hall Contra Dance (Cambridge)

Old Songs Contra Dances (Voorheesville)

Rensselaer English Country Dance (Troy)

Saratoga Contra Dance

Stockade Assembly (Albany) English Country

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