

Square dancing took root in the Appalachian Mountains early in America's history. Rural communities gathered in homes to play music and dance, usually with a fiddle, guitar, and maybe a bass, banjo or mandolin.

The dance style is named for the formation of Four couples, eight dancers, facing each other at the start of a song. A caller guides participants through moves like switching sides and trading partners. On this episode of Expressive Idaho, Arlie Sommer visits two women who are calling to a new generation of Idaho dancers.

**Dorothy Shue:** Square dancing was a way for the small communities to come together and oftentimes in someone's house or at the Grange Hall or the church. Maybe there would be two people to play music and one person to direct, and that is the square dance caller.

I'm Dorothy Shue and I'm from Boise, Idaho, and I'm a square dance caller.

**Ava Honey:** Dorothy is such a dear friend of mine and she's my mentor for square dance calling. I'm Ava Honey, and I live in Boise, Idaho. I think it's called square dancing because of the actual form and the arrangement that the dancers are in. Four couples facing each other, forming a box or a square.

**Dorothy Shue:** Square dancing is a traditional dance. It doesn't have to be with live music, but in the past, it probably always was. And certainly when we're doing it, we prefer to have live music: fiddle and guitar and bass.

**Ava Honey:** Old time music is a traditional style of music that comes from the Appalachian area of the United States and is here from all over the world, [with] very deep roots with African American community and people who lived kind of in the hills, who use it as a form of entertainment and storytelling. The marriage of old time music and square dancing is really bringing community all together.

**Dorothy Shue:** Old time music is traditionally not amplified music. The roots also include Ireland and England, and the tunes overlap.

**Ava Honey:** When I talk to people about square dancing, they think of their grandparents. They think of these big skirts with a lot of Kremlins, which is tulle fabric underneath. It's very scratchy, but it really poofs out your skirt and it puts on quite a show when you're twirling around.

The very first square dance that I went to at the Linen Building with the hokum high flyers and Dorothy calling, I wore one of those dresses, and I did not know that that wasn't the deal. I'm kind of a fashion experimenter, but I was the only person there wearing a traditional square dance dress. And, I mean, I felt a little silly, but I was also like, this is an amazing skirt. It's like fully twirls. And, uh, well, I kind of got noticed. Dorothy, she said something to me after the dance and said, "Hey, you look like you can dance. Do you want to try to call square dances?"

**Dorothy Shue:** Because the caller can see everyone. The caller knows who is there. And I looked out and I thought, oh, now that person knows how to dance. So I thought, okay, I wonder who that is. And I. And I found out. And it was Ava.

**Ava Honey:** Yeah, she's an amazing teacher. She's very patient, very encouraging, very supportive.

There's so many books about school dances. So I would read the dances. And in the dance books they describe the moves explanation and they'd even, you know, add in the patter. So what they would say chicken in the bread pan, picking out dough dosido with the one, you know, that would be the patter.

I actually made these little paper people and they were just very simple. But one had a square, one had a circle. So I made four couples and I labeled them couple number one. So there was one square circle that was one, two, three and four. I have Cowboy Dances, which is this pretty essential Bible, if you will, for square dance callers. It was actually published in Caldwell. And I would move the little pieces around. This is when I didn't have access to dancers. So I would like, "what does that mean?" So I'd move them around and be like, "oh, that's what you do".

Reading it is one thing, but having something to physically move, which is really wonderful as being a dance scholar, because when you are describing a dance and how the moves are, seeing people do it or not do it can be such a tool of like, oh, I described it this way, and you're actually doing it the way I'm describing it, but I need to I need to adjust that.

When I start a dance, I usually try to gather everyone into a big circle and start a very simple fun, inclusive dance.

With ours, you can come however you want to. You can wear a dress or jeans or boots or tennis shoes or barefoot. It's really come as you are. Anyone and everyone is welcome.

So you can show up and really not know anything at all, and have the guidance of a caller to walk you through the steps.

**Dorothy Shue:** You have to learn that it's all fun and it doesn't matter if you make mistakes. In fact, I lots of times I think that's the most fun because everyone starts laughing and then it still works. You still go back to your home spot and swing and so it's okay.

**Ava Honey:** It's physical. I mean, you're you're standing side by side people. You're you're holding hands with people. You're looking people in the eye. It's very personal. And that's there's not really a lot of spaces where we do that.

**Dorothy Shue:** We were definitely not experts when we started back in the 70s, you know. So we've been doing it for a long time. And that's why it's so nice to have younger people coming. And we can share that, whether it's playing the music or it's calling the dances or just being part of the dances, having some good dancers out there is always fun to help everyone else along too.

**Ava Honey:** I think a lot of the instruction that happens, I think it includes more people in the dance, because I think a lot of people would feel intimidated.

One of my favorite things about this is everything is left at the door. People show up as people. Politics and religion and social beliefs really don't come on the dance floor. It's it's amazing. It's it's humanity at its best. I really stand behind that and feel that.

**Expressive Idaho is produced by Arlie Sommer and edited by Sáša Woodruff. We heard music from the Ketchum band Idyl Time, recorded during a square dance in Boise. Historic recordings of fiddlers Bill Traub and John R. Griffin were also featured, from the Library of Congress.**

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**To see photos of our featured square dancers, go to [boisestatepublicradio.org](http://boisestatepublicradio.org).**