

International Money Musk Moment Unites Dancers in Four Countries

by David Millstone and David Smukler

It all started with a piece of serendipity, a casual thought.

We were both at the annual Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend in January, presenting a “Cracking Chestnuts” workshop of some dances from our book of the same name. We discovered that each of us had planned a book release party, a full evening of chestnuts, for the same date, March 14, one in upstate New York and the other in Vermont.

“What if each of us calls Money Musk as the first dance after the break?” We knew that this was the custom, back in the day, at some local dances in the Monadnock region of New Hampshire; dancers who liked Money Musk would line up in anticipation, and those who didn’t could take a few extra sips out in the parking lot. Within a moment, we agreed that we’d do that, call the dance at about the same time on the same day.

“Could we recruit other callers to do the same thing? Wouldn’t that be fun!”

And so began the Money Musk Moment.

We already knew that this dance presents more than a few challenges. No less an authority than Ralph Page, for example, had acknowledged its special and sometimes fatal attraction:

“Seems like everybody who ever heard of a contra dance wants to learn Money Musk. Often it’s the first contra they attempt, and after getting gloriously mixed up decide then and there that contra dances aren’t for them and stand steadfast in their determination. Did you run a hundred yard dash the first time you walked? Then why do you expect to dance Money Musk the first contra you try?” (*Northern Junket*, Vol. 2, #11, Oct. 1951, p. 20)

We each had presented the dance successfully in numerous occasions, but would others want to tackle it? Callers would have to consider many factors:

- Money Musk is a triple minor proper dance. Since these appear rarely on contra dance programs nowadays, many 21st century contra dancers do not understand how they work, and extra instruction is typically required.
- The style of the dance is old-fashioned. It involves a same sex (proper) right and left through, and the number one couple is an active couple, while two thirds of the dancers are in a support role at any given time. This is not inherently difficult but the style is unfamiliar to many. Again, more instruction or explanation might be required.
- Money Musk has no neighbor swing. It also has no partner swing. That’s right —no swings at all! In contemporary contra culture, some dancers complain if they don’t feel they get their quota of swings.

- The timing of the center portion of the dance is subtle, and there are many variations. This creates a teaching challenge.
- Many curmudgeonly traditional dancers have developed strong opinions about timing and style, which can create some tension on the floor, or between such dancers and their caller.
- The tune called Money Musk is a challenging one to play. And yet play it they must, as the tune is so closely associated with the dance. Would the caller have musicians ready to do justice to the tune?

We contacted other chestnuts enthusiasts in the Northeast, and then issued a general invitation through the Trad-dance-callers and SharedWeight listservs. We also e-mailed callers and organizers for events found in the dance listings on TheDanceGypsy.com and on Ted Crane's database. Almost immediately, we found willing collaborators. One of the first to weigh in was a caller in Christchurch, New Zealand. Thanks to the International Date Line, his presentation would be on March 14, local time, but still March 13 here in the United States. Our Money Musk Moment was going international! Would others join in?

Mid-March came, and with financial backing from CDSS, David Smukler's event offered free admission with refreshments for a full evening of chestnuts; instead of the usual 40+ dancers, more than 100 turned out. David Millstone also presented a full chestnuts program at his home dance to a large crowd, some of whom drive several hours for this special event. Each of us was pleased with our local results, and then we started receiving reports of Money Musk moments father away—Maine and Michigan, Washington and Kansas, Denmark and Switzerland.

Money Musk has been around for a couple of hundred years, but it was a new experience for many of these dancers. Furthermore, many musicians learned the tune specially for the occasion and several callers had never before presented the dance.

The final tally: 22 locations, 21 callers, 88 musicians, 1,376 dancers!

Participants shared generally positive comments about the experience:

- Money Musk is one of my favorites, so it was wonderful to do that last night—I particularly like when the active person swoops (or backs) into his/her spot in the lines of three – or as an inactive, when two of you are receiving the “incoming” active with just the right timing. Plus while we were dancing it, it was wonderful to realize that this dance being done by like-minded but unknown “friends” all around the globe, with great callers and bands all urging on the dancers!
- I received miscellaneous comments from the crowd including, "I enjoyed the same gender R&L through," "I remember dancing this 20 years ago when I did reenactment dances in Virginia," "I didn't dance tonight but I remember watching my father dancing this when I was a child."

- While I share at least some of the modern sentiment in favor of swings and of equally-active 1s and 2s, I also value variety and tradition, so I found it delightful to be doing these old chestnuts in the knowledge that dancers before me have been experiencing the same pleasures for centuries. (And in the case of Money Musk, in the knowledge that others around the world were simultaneously experiencing the pleasure.)

It would be misleading to suggest that everyone met with unqualified success. As noted above, Money Musk continues to present challenges to contemporary dancers, especially those familiar only with double improper or Becket formation dances:

- Experienced and new dancers struggled with the triple minor progression, were challenged by the varied timing of the allemandes, and at times confused by the same gender R&L through. However they helped each other and managed to dance well with the repetition.
- It didn't go very well - they had trouble with the timing of the balances, and remembering who was in and who was out as they got to the ends of the lines.

For a look at all the comments, and a tally of the participants, visit [the website](#) that documents the event in detail. This "Bring Back Money Musk" site includes links to audio and video clips of the dance, including stylish animated versions of origami cranes dancing.

Granted, some of the dances happened as much as a week later than the Official Date. We rationalize that for a dance this old, one week can count as merely a "moment" in its history. And, after all, the International Money Musk Moment was not a sporting competition. Participants were promoting a fine old dance, and sharing a connection to a tradition of contra dancing that is rich and varied.

With that in mind, next year we go from a moment to a month: March of 2010 will be International Money Musk Month. Join the movement!

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