

HISTORY OF SWINGIN' TERN DANCES

The origin of Swingin' Tern Dances dates back to a conversation at a diner in September 1983. Artie Grimes, Don Flaherty, Jim Gartner and Doug Heacock were at the Golden Touch Diner after going to a concert at the Closing Circle [a coffeehouse run by FMS, a sister organization to the Folk Project]. Artie and Don were lamenting that there was no place to contra dance outside of Princeton and New York City. Doug said he didn't have much experience with contradancing but was good at organizing things. He had just joined the board of the Folk Project, which could provide the umbrella support for an upstart venture. The incubation had begun.

The next month, Steve Schnur was the dance caller at the Folk Project Fall Festival. Lori Weiss [Falco] mentioned the idea of a new dance series. Steve encouraged the idea and said he would love to call for the dance.

A committee started to meet at Artie's house to brainstorm. Artie, Don, Doug, Lori, Jim, Eddie Roffman and Jean Silver were early participants. Doug asked for suggestions for a name for the dance series. Don suggested "Petronella"—Doug felt that might be too esoteric for non-dancers. Eddie and Artie suggested "Swing and Turn". Doug said, "Oh, you mean those funky shore birds?" "No, Swing and Turn from Swing and Turn Jubilee, an old timey standard." Doug said, "That's great, we can call it Swingin' Tern Dances and have a pun already built into the name—many puns can follow!"

Doug and Don agreed to be co-chairs. Don and Artie agreed to book the talent. Roger Dietz and FMS [Folk Music Society of Northern NJ] were involved from the beginning offering support and sound equipment. Doug did the legwork lining up our first venue at the College of Saint Elizabeth in Convent Station. Knowing that the Folk Project didn't entertain half-baked ideas, Doug tried to work out all the details, going as far as printing up a flier for the first three months. Contingent on Folk Project board approval, Steve Schnur agreed to call the first dance for a \$25 minimum payment. Doug went to an open stage at the Folk Project's Minstrel Show Coffeehouse and found the Pot Luck String Band [which included Wayne and Dolly Farmer who were active in the dance for many years, and Bill Christophersen who frequently plays for us in other bands]. Pot Luck agreed to a \$35 minimum for their six members.

Doug's presentation to the Folk Project board created heated discussion. The Project had never supported dance. Doug pointed out that the FP constitution referred to support of the folk arts, not just folk music. The board finally approved the motion

and Swingin' Tern Dances was hatched. Once the Project made their decision, they threw their full support behind the dance, with many members showing up for the first dance on January 7th, 1984. For a \$3 admission price, 112 dancers turned out for a phenomenal first dance and the caller and band went home with well over their minimum payment. Swingin' Tern took full flight with between 120 and 200 dancers per dance in the first year.

Originally held once monthly, we started dancing twice a month in 1986. We held Dawn Dances for New Year's Eve to dance into 1986 and 1987. Since then we have rung in every New Year by dancing past midnight. With our first year at the College of Saint Elizabeth and second year at the Madison YMCA, we found a long term nest for 23 years at Ogden Memorial Church in Chatham. In 2009 we flew to our current nest at First Presbyterian Church in East Hanover, NJ. Who woulda thunk it back in 1984, that we would be where we are today with many more years of dancing at Swingin' Tern to come!