

## John Oldfield: The Accidental Caller

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Have you ever wondered about your trusty Gay Callers Association officers? Do you know your new president, John Oldfield? I knew very little about him, so I decided to ask.

### ***Where does he hail from?***

John Oldfield was born in upstate New York some time in the middle of the last century. He moved west progressively, from high school to college and finally to graduate school, ending up in Chicago, Illinois in 1981.

### ***What did he study?***

In school, John majored in history with an emphasis on the Reformation, and took minors in English literature and philosophy.



### ***Any hidden talents?***

In addition to square dancing, John plays the drums, guitar, banjo, mandolin, string bass, and harmonica. He says that “at forty years of age, I realized that I’d wanted to play the drums since I was an adolescent. My partner at the time (at 40, not as an adolescent, silly) looked a little cross-eyed, but didn’t object.”

### ***What does he do for a living?***

Now in his third career since graduate school, John works for a large printing company located in Elk Grove Village, a Chicago suburb west of O’Hare Airport.

### ***What does John do for fun?***

On a more personal note: John’s favorite movie is *Great Expectations* with John Mills and a “wonderfully teenaged” Alec Guinness. His favorite contemporary movie is *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* with Jack Nicholson. John loves reading Charles Dickens and appreciates Dickens’ ability to draw in and titillate the reader with broadly sketched but finely tuned characters. His favorite composer is Bach; Jane Oliver his favorite singer, and The Proclaimers his favorite musical group. Arnie Duncan wins John’s admiration as “best musician”. John was privileged to work with him and says that “after the initial ‘hero worship’ on my part, he was a perfectly wonderful person to work with to make the Square Dance program come alive.”

### ***How did John start calling?***

John is, by his own admission, “The Accidental Caller”. John was accidentally exposed to square dancing in the late 1980’s when he went to Carol’s Speakeasy (a local Chicago bar) to learn to two-step. After learning square dancing through the Advanced level with Lin Jarvis, he was accidentally given a live microphone. He began to learn to call square dancing, and eventually to teach.

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John told me that he considers himself rather anonymous. He gets a lot of love and adoration from dancers on a small scale, from his local dancers in Chicago. He's been calling for Chi-Town Squares for a couple of decades now and some dancers commented recently on how he has come out of his shell. John agrees.

In private, he is "in his head" when playing music, painting, drawing, cooking, or making a new beer. When he is up in front of people, he has knowledge, experience, and gives himself permission to convey a persona needed to get the dancers to have a good time.

He attended the caller's school sponsored by the GCA at the 1992 IAGSDC convention in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and has returned to GCA Caller School for tune-ups on an occasional basis.

### **What kinds of calling does John do?**

Currently, John teaches the Beginning class for the Chi-Town Squares, although he's taught Chi-Town every level from Basic through C-1 over the years. John is a member of both CALLERLAB and the GCA. He's a Past Vice-President of the GCA and our current President.



John focuses on teaching people how to enjoy square dancing, and more recently, on teaching people how to enjoy calling. He says something's changed for him the past few years. He knows that he's "been around the block" now it's time for him to give something back. He says "An anonymous donation is not much of a contribution," and realizes he must go out and stand up in front of people and lead. Good for John!

### **How did John get started with Chi-Town Squares?**

Michael Maltenfort, the GCA's current Treasurer, also hails from Chicago. Michael recently reminisced with me, telling me that John started out at Chi-Town Squares as its first, and for a long time, only gay caller.

In 2002, John was forced to develop his skills faster than he'd bargained for, when the club's long-time primary teaching caller, Lin Jarvis, passed away suddenly. John stepped up to take on Lin's classes and club nights. That year, John was already scheduled to call a C1 class, and suddenly found himself thrown from the frying pan into the fire, as he was asked to call his very first beginner (Basic/Mainstream/Plus) class.

He stepped right up to the challenge, and helped Chi-Town Squares move through a very difficult time. *[Editor's Note: I was privileged to attend the graduation of John's first BMP class that year ... and the students obviously had a wonderful time.]*

John is always kind and pleasant, says Michael, "You know, some callers get mad at dancers from the microphone or at a dance, but I've heard others say, and I agree, that John would never do that."

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John is especially well-liked by many dancers who've learned to dance and call from him. "He helped me to learn how to call. He'd look over my sequences and give me pointers. He encourages everyone who picks up a microphone," says Michael.

### ***Does John dance?***

As a dancer, John hails from both Chi-Town Squares and Grand Rapid Squares. He dances a self-described "shaky" C2 and calls Basic through C1.

John likes having fun as a dancer. He recognizes that a weak dancer in a strong square can make significant progress if they're not pushed, pulled and shoved, but given a reasonable amount of time to figure it out. He knows the value of directing in a quiet, non-forceful manner.

### ***What kind of calling setup does he use?***

John runs his music from a laptop, and carries an MP3 player running on a Handspring Visor PDA as his backup. He also carries a USB microdrive that carries 50% of his music library, and a trunk full of vinyl 45's as well. This is one prepared caller. John tends to order music as CDs so he has the original recording, and likes the ability to get hard copies of the vocals, harmonies and key change versions.

### ***John's greatest achievement as a caller?***

He says he is still waiting to call that perfect dance.

His greatest achievement: John choreographed the opening scene, an old time square dance, of the opera *Susannah* for Western Michigan University's music department and for the College of DuPage in Illinois.

He also performed the part of the Square Dance Caller in George Balanchine's ballet *Square Dance* with the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago. *Square Dance* was written in 1958, and performed for the Joffrey's Spring program at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago in March, 2000. The Joffrey Ballet (and John) were given a special invitation to reprise the performance at the Balanchine Festival at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC in September, 2000. The Joffrey would not, however, allow him to dance (must have been the snakeskin boots...)

### ***What does John want to do in his time as GCA President?***

His aspirations include several things. He wants the GCA to be in contact with all the convention committees and clubs bidding for future conventions, contacting them early to provide additional information that will help the bidding and planning processes. He was part of revising and circulating the "GCA and Convention" document to all of the existing convention committees as well as the two clubs bidding for the next unawarded convention. He's working to bring to the forefront the role that GCA has at convention and be there to offer help in any way that will enhance the convention experience for the dancers.

John stressed that he didn't do (and isn't doing) all of this by himself. He says that his "stuff" was accomplished by members of the board and other interested association members. I

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simply asked some specific questions from the people who had the experience and expertise and wrote it all down and sent it out. Our members are more than willing to get involved.”

***What are John’s future aspirations?***

I’ll let John speak for himself:

“I’m going to ask the membership what they feel we should be doing as an association. I’m interested in issues that affect local clubs. I’m going to ask people to get involved. This is your Association. I’m going to ask you. So far, I’m really encouraged by the current response. However, I’m going to keep on asking, because with direction and effort there is no limit. One of the big beefs I have is that we aren’t recognized as a professional organization. We have to be professional to be recognized as professional. Let’s get beyond the ‘amateur label’ and work toward a professional organization that trains callers of high quality.”

