

Spotlight on Earl Gaddis

Music and friendships, linked by strong emotions, are essential to his world. For many years a cornerstone of the band Bare Necessities, Earl Gaddis confides that making music is not work, for otherwise it would not be called "playing" music.

Earl was born and spent his childhood in Arlington, Virginia, where he remained through college. When students in his junior high school were encouraged to learn an instrument, Earl took up classical violin and joined the school orchestra.

At George Washington University he majored in physics, switching to psychology in his senior year. He was always taking extra courses. Earl also played in the college orchestra until the overwhelming repertoire of obscure Russian symphonies became too much for him and he left it.

By now he was trying to fit all four years of required psychology courses into his senior year, so music took a back seat while he obtained his undergraduate degree in psychology—then pursued a full-time graduate psychology program at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, simultaneously auditing engineering courses at two other universities. After completing his master's degree in psychology, he studied engineering full-time until illness prevented him from completing that degree.

Earl always wanted to work with people and with things, to find some way of combining complex technology with that which is very much about people. In 1969 he came to Boston for a job as a research psychologist, but within a week had become transformed into a "design engineer."

Earl had participated in and sometimes played for international folkdancing in college and graduate school. On arriving in Boston, he discovered international folkdancing at MIT. Quite shy, he explored the rich world of dance rhythms and movements anonymously amid the throngs in the Sala de Puerto Rico.

A musician friend brought Earl to one of Dudley Laufman's dances; he was encouraged to sit in with the band and started playing for contra dances. When Tuesday contras and squares at the Cambridge YWCA was desperate for musicians, Earl was recruited, soon becoming a regular. As word of his musical skill spread, he was sought for playing at many dances and other occasions. Playing dance music soon became a major factor in his life.



—from *Hudson Barn*, copyright 1980 by the Boston Centre, Inc.

When a musician was needed for an English dance performance tape, Susan (now Emily) Ferguson turned to Earl, who did his best. He played the music in proper classical style, but had no idea how to give it the particular kind of lift and drive that English dancing requires. It became very clear that he would not be able to play well for English dancing unless he learned how it felt to dance. So, with Emily's encouragement, he started attending dances at the Cambridge YWCA on Wednesday nights. The music was beautiful, but the dances were confounding. He was unprepared for the change at the bottom of a set from active to inactive, and alternating between threes and twos in a triple-minor dance was odd and confusing at first. Eventually he got the hang of it, and the experiences as a dancer provided an essential understanding of what dancers need from musicians.

With the downturn in the Route-128 companies, engineering work became scarce and Earl was laid off. He took on jobs that nobody else wanted until he could get established as a self-employed biomedical engineering consultant. He worked successfully in this field for over a decade.

In 1983 Earl left Boston to study visual arts at the Kansas City Art Institute. This provided a new opportunity: to immerse himself totally in the visual arts for a while, as a balance and complement to the musical part of his life as an artist. Upon completing the three-year program, Earl returned to Boston with yet another degree, now ready to embrace a career as a full-time dance musician.

Playing for dances was a turning point in his life. While studying classical music in his youth, he had been

encouraged to practice playing the music precisely as written by the composer. Earl tells it best: "I didn't know that there were alternatives. Your job is to learn to play the stuff so well and so consistently that you will play it exactly the same way no matter what is going on around you. You must not be distracted by sounds and other things happening in your vicinity. First you learn how to do it. You do all the studying and all the practicing. After you've learned how to do it, you play it."

By contrast, in the contradance and English dance environments he was encouraged to perform the music as soon as he could carry the essentials of the tune. As Earl puts it, "First you play it, because it's just here and it's your job to play it; then you learn as you go. You're allowed to make sense of the things that happen while you're playing and you don't yet know what you're doing. What I later discovered to be true about dance music, which was so liberating, was that in the first place your job is to respond tremendously to everything happening around you—to what the other musicians are doing, to what the dancers are doing, to the temperature of the room—and I've interacted with this so much better." Earl was particularly impressed by the role of improvisation, working diligently to sharpen that skill.

He says he had always wanted his life's work to integrate his love for people with a deep interest in technical things. Always expecting to find this integration in the subject matter of a career, he stumbled over it in playing music for dances, which he describes as an immersion in the process of controlling a very complex piece of equipment in very precise and subtle ways.

Yet the "product" of this very technical process is a purely emotional and spiritual one, whose function is to reach out lovingly to people and move them profoundly. It's an honor, he feels, to have people move in response to his playing—and even pay for their participation, while he's paid to participate. Interaction between music and dance is about the heart and the spirit, making it so much fun for both the musicians and the dancers.

Since 1987 Earl has been based in western Massachusetts. His somewhat fragmented life involves frequent bookings, with an abundance of annual weekend gigs and considerable travel. While he loves flying, Earl also loves to take long car trips by himself to distant venues, accompanied by books on tape, sometimes covering 3000 miles or more at a jaunt. When not performing or on the road, he retreats to an apartment in Northampton overlooking a small public plaza, where he finds solitude without feeling isolated—this provides a welcome complement to his public performances.

—Eph Weiss

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As a prelude to NEFFA, we will have a party night on April 12. NEFFA brings many friends from across the country to the Boston area. Dancing with them always makes this evening special.

On April 19, our dance features Susan Kevra. Showcasing leaders from abroad and from our region is one of the new things we are trying this season. Last fall we had Robert Moir from England; Susan will be our regional caller this year. She is known mostly for her contra calling, but she also teaches ECD, working with Colin Hume and others. If there are other regional callers that dancers would like to dance with, please let the English Committee know.

May 17 brings the Open Mike, which is a chance for dancers to try out their skills as leaders. Callers will be screened by Helene Cornelius, so anyone who wants to call a dance should contact Helene Cornelius at least a month in advance of the event.

The year concludes with our annual end of the season party on June 21.

A number of people have told me in the last year or so how friendly people are on Wednesday nights, but I think we can still do better. I've noticed that we still have people sitting out on the sidelines from time to time. This isn't deliberate; we just seem to be getting into a pattern of asking somebody nearby to dance. So dancers, raise your sights! Look to the sidelines. Women, if you see a woman sitting out, suggest to a gentleman that he ask her to dance. Men, if you see a shy guy on the sidelines, ask a lady to get him onto the floor. I've been told of people trying "to do the right thing" but being intercepted before they reached the side of the hall. Let's be understanding about declining an invitation, so that someone sitting out can dance.

As ever, if you see a way we can improve what we're doing or if you have a new programming idea, feel free to talk to me or any of the other English Dance Committee members.

—Terry Gaffney, Chair, English Dance Committee

