Contra Pulse Episode 3: Charlie Pilzer Part 2

**Julie Vallimont**

Hi, this is Julie Vallimont and welcome back to Contra Pulse. This episode we have the follow up interview with Charlie Pilzer. After we spoke at NEFFA, we wanted to continue our conversation. And so I was fortunate to be able to have a visit with him last May at his home in Takoma Park, Maryland. We spent a while chatting about contra music and his experiences as a dance musician. And he played some piano, and I got to see his music library a little bit. In our conversation, we got to some of the big questions about how the contra scene music is changing, and got a little bit of Charlie's take on those changes. Without any further ado, here's part two. Okay. So, welcome to part two of our interview with Charlie Pilzer.

**Charlie Pilzer**

I have no idea what I said in Part One.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, I do. I remember everthing. Charlie and I had a wonderful chat at NEFFA, which was actually a really great place to talk about all this stuff. There was contra music in the background and people walking by and a lot of the people we were talking about happened to be at NEFFA. And so in Part One of the interview, we talked a little bit about how Charlie started playing for contras and kind of like where you learned and you know, you kind of learn in the DC area and I love, I love the story that you kind of just your band kind of made it up together.

**Charlie Pilzer**

That's right.

**Julie Vallimont**

Which is so great. Do you play different tunes differently? Depending on the genre?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Absolutely. No question about it and in fact, my taste and medleys are I keep like tunes with like. So it would be really, really weird for me to do a medley of Rock that Cradle Joe with St. Anne's Reel, with a foxtrot. I just wouldn't do that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Why not? I mean, I'm playing devil's advocate because I am like you I don't mix genres.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Oh, I know. I know exactly why not. Because if you mix the genres too much it all becomes just a beige melange that there's no distinction. So for me, I want to put an Irish tune with an Irish tune, Quebec tune with a Quebec tune, an old timey tune, Southern tune with a Southern tune and actually accentuate the stylistic differences because that gives flavor to the music. At least for the players, if not for the dancers, different tunes sound different, even if they don't know why it sounds different. The kind of thing I would do to back up an old timey tune just isn't going to be the same as I would do for a French Canadian tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. So sometimes I feel like there's a logistical reason too for putting those tunes together because often you pick an old timey tune for a dance because of the phrasing of the dance and the groove of the tune. And so if you're ,,,,

**Charlie Pilzer**

And the moves and the dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly, and so that old timey groove in the way you play piano would work for one kind of dance. But then if you switch that groove halfway through to like a smooth flowy Irish tune, that just doesn't make any sense. It wouldn't fit the dance as well.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Exactly

**Julie Vallimont**

The one time I do mix genres is when I'm playing medleys, like the NEFFA style medley that's like 25 minutes long.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah. But that's cool. You have six different callers doing six... And there accentuating the changes is more important, because you're trying to give clues to the dancers to say, “Oh, hey, pay attention. Here's a new dance.:

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. So it feels like instead of one eight or 10 minute experience, it feels like six different five minute experiences all tacked on.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Actually they're three minute experiences.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, yeah, my math is off. Yeah six times two, You're right. Three minutes. Yeah. So many little three minute experiences. What a funny thing we do. Why do we do that? It's so funny.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, I mean, I mean, an NEFFA medley is theoretically 18 and a half minutes long, because it's six times six plus one. So it's 37 times at a nominal 120 clicks to the minute. It takes 30 seconds once through the dance. Actually it takes 32 seconds. And maybe it's a little bit longer, but maybe you're going at 116 rather than 120. But on the average, you can figure that out.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, like, contra music, I've been thinking about this like, as a genre, what is contra music these days?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Anything you want it to be.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, it's a funny tradition, right? our tradition is that we take tunes from a whole bunch of other traditions, and then play them kind of however we want to.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Ok, alright, so here's one for you.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a funny tradition.

**Charlie Pilzer**

So, you heard a dance going..... [*music playing*]

**Julie Vallimont**

Now it is it could be any of it. Could have been Wild Asparagus. Could have been Great Bear. Like the first few bands that ....any band would do that. I do that. Nowadays, I couldn't tell you who that is. Which is ....

**Charlie Pilzer**

I'm thinking Great Bear.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, exactly, 20 years ago, or maybe more like 10-15 years ago, there were only a few bands who you would immediately think of. And that's interesting.

**Charlie Pilzer**

And that might be the whole thing. There might not be a melody to it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And on one extreme, you know, like Wild Asparagus would do some riff based stuff. But generally, there's a tune. Great Bear took that to the place of like, what's the tune for? The tunes show up they especially show up in the beginning of the medley when the caller is still teaching the dance, and the dancers need that phrasing. But then the tune might be like, go away and not come back again. And then you forget it was ever there, which is interesting.

**Charlie Pilzer**

But then I'll do fun things like I'll watch the dance, you know, and you'll see, you know, forward, you know, you know, lines on the side, forward and back, you know, and I'll accentuate where they meet up in the middle or essentially, you know, on a balance, you know, that you kind of want to get that little pulse.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. You're watching the phrasing and you're kind of spiking different moods.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Or say ...a balance and petronella turn, you leave the beat out and you let the dancers put the beat in.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's fun.

**Charlie Pilzer**

And then they and then if they catch on you all sudden they you know you'll go you know you'll do something, you'll leave a little beat out though. They'll really try to stomp hard to fill in the missing beat.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Which I love. I love those moments of connecting with the dancers. That's to me when it becomes magical.

**Charlie Pilzer**

I always watch the dancers. Well, how can you tell what you're doing you aren't watching the dancers? You have your head down beside your piano. You might as well stay at home.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right? I think, unfortunately, playing with sheet music. You know, there are folks who do it. But it can often distract you, your full attention isn't on the dancers at that point when you have to watch the music. And so it's not a judgmental thing that I'm saying.

**Charlie Pilzer**

No, no, you only have .... but you only have so much split brain capability.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Exactly. And you know, it's part of also the pick up nature of contra band. So people are throwing tunes each other they don't always know. And so sometimes it's really great to get out the *Portland* or the *Fiddler's Repertoire* or whatever, you know, it's great, but it means you can't watch the dancers.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Julie, can you talk while you play?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes. If I'm playing boomchuck. Boom chuck for me is like this rhythm. If I'm playing just basic comfort, if I'm doing complicated riffs, or if I'm doing... I do a lot of things with two hands differently. Like I'll play a counter melody line on my right hand and a bass line on my left. I can't talk while I do that easily. What about you?

**Charlie Pilzer**

So if I'm playing any sort of regular accompaniment to a tune I know, yeah, I can actually have a conversation. If I'm trying to follow chords on a piece that I don't really know and trying to make sense about how the chords flow one end to another. So I have like a piece of sheet music in front of me and I'm trying to listen what's going on then you have the speech kid police go out the window. Because it you know, it defaults to grunts.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah. And also I have my listening brain. I can't talk when I'm listening in the same way. Yeah, it's funny, like, I know a fiddler who can talk while he fiddles if the fiddle is down here. If he moves it up to his mouth he can't. If he moves a fiddle up here, he can't talk anymore.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Why would you move the fiddle up here that's on the wrong side.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, whatever, okay. You... clearly I'm not a fiddler. But if he has an improper violin position, he can't talk while he plays. If he brings it down here he can.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Oh how interesting.

**Julie Vallimont**

....exactly the same thing. But it's just, neurologically, it's really interesting. And so, like you're multitasking a lot as a contra player because you're watching the dancers. You're working with the caller. I don't think callers always realize when we can talk and when we can't. And they'll often come and talk to me right as we're about to do some tune switch or something that I really have to be paying attention. Like, I just want one finger , and you're paying attention to your bandmates.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, you pay attention to bandmates... All right, so say I'm at Glen Echo. Okay, Washington DC. So the typical way it's set up there, there's a little grand piano, a little short one, that tends to be stage left all the way on the left hand side of the stage as you look at the dancers, then your lead is usually next to you, although not always. The next musician. So if I'm playing, say, in a band of four, there's a band I play with where I'll play, there's a mandolin player next to me, the lead fiddler's next and flutes on the end. But so I'll sit there and I'll have half an eye on the dancers, an ear on what's going on next to me, the other half an eye over looking at the caller on the other side. And the piano and my third eyes, looking at the pieces of music. We play all these tunes that are so weird that nobody knows them.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hmm. Why? Who picks them? I don't want to derail your point though, go ahead.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Well, in that particular case, the flute... all right, so this particular group is oddly enough, all four of us actually went to music school and actually had you know, are versed in real life classical music training at one time, although I haven't played any in years. So I don't know if I count anymore. But I did have the background. So each of us have probably been playing our instruments 50 years, or at least playing music, you know. I sort of have been playing music seriously since I was like 13. So that would be 55 years ago now. You know, so the four of us, you know, sort of collectively have 200 years of music training and we've toured, you know, played in lots and lots of places, not just in the US. So there's a huge amount of playing capability in this group. So the flute player like plays all these chromatic tunes that you know, and keys in B flat and things with weird changes. And these really gnarly tunes that you never see come up because nobody else can play them.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that's part of the contra tradition. Like, I just... it's funny to wrap your head around a tradition that, like we play some, what we call traditional contra tunes, like a lot of them are New England tunes, but more and more there's like tunes that are becoming new traditional, like Catharsis and Flying Home to Shelley and Bus Stop and like modern tunes that everyone knows, and plays. And then it's also totally traditional, to play random tunes that we make up that are really weird. It's traditional to borrow tunes from France or Ireland or Scotland, or old time tunes.

**Charlie Pilzer**

So so in this group one of the sets, we borrow these tunes from the 1500s You know, which were dance tunes in the 1500s. We have one we have.,,,,Now this is the mix.... so we'll have a Kerry polka, and then a rota from like 1480 or whatever it is, and then back to another Kerry polka.

**Julie Vallimont**

So when you're picking tunes, what is the common denominator that makes a tune a good dance tune? Because you're thoughtful about the tunes you play.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Well, it's very interesting. In this particular group, we have diverging opinions about what makes a good tune. What I think makes a good tune, there's something that at its very heart is rhythmic. No matter what else happens in the tune there's a rhythmic component to the tune whether it's the melody or the accompaniment or the the second melody or you know, because if you don't have something defined, I mean even deconstructed tunes have a rhythmic component. in fact they're nothing but rhythmic components.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like riffs and things like, yeah.

**Charlie Pilzer**

But when you take all the rhythm out, then the dancers have a hard time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Because they have less notes and stuff to them, they need some rhythmic underpinning to make a mark.

**Charlie Pilzer**

The other thing that makes a good contra dance tune it to me is one that's phrased. Because if you think about contra dance moves, they move in, you know, four measures or two measures or eight measures. You know, every move has a certain number of beats and fills up. Some are expandable, a swing can be short, a swing can be long. You know you could have a half hey you can have a full hey, you could have a walk around which is kind of a quarter hey, if you think about it. And depending on the dance, you want a phrase, you want music, that phrases to the dance so that the dancers know where the next move begins, even if the caller doesn't prompt it. Even if the dancers don't know that that's that the music is queuing them. And it's funny because there's a trend in some dance writing, where to me the dances don't work as well, the ones that kind of ignore that a little bit where they start kind of stringing moves together a little arbitrarily. And maybe they cross the phrase.

**Julie Vallimont**

Mm hmm. So the dance has to have good flow, whatever good flow means. Yeah. That's interesting.

**Charlie Pilzer**

So there's a huge advantage in a way if it's a band if you work with the same caller a lot. Because then the two of you can kind of meld stuff that fits. And there are tunes that work better for some dances than others. And when I'm playing, if I see the tunes not working, it's like, you know, they talked about calling an audible, you just pass the line down to the next musician:“We're getting out of this tune. Forget this medley. We're going somewhere else because this is not working.”

**Julie Vallimont**

Bail. Bail, we've all been there.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, don't don't don't stay there. 'Cause when you're playing for a contra dance what you're doing is functional music. This is music for a purpose. You know, if you play for concert it almost doesn't matter what you play if you can convey some sort of compelling feeling or emotion or you paint a musical picture that you you can vary things, you can be rubato, you know, change the tempo, you can slam stuff together. And that's all to keep the interest of the audience. But if you're playing for contra dance if you can't play music that works for making for a good dance experience, why are you here?

**Julie Vallimont**

So any tune you pick has to fulfill those basic requirements.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then after that, it's all flavor and fun.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

A variety of moves and textures, but it has to have that foundation. So then what about the old adage? Any tune for any dance?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Not true.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, this is your interview, not mine, you know, but like changing choreography. I think the choreography is become a lot more specialized. So callers are asking for more demanding things than they used to in terms of bands have to have ... like, I, we could we could play caller bingo of what a bad caller is gonna ask us for in a night. I'll put slinky jigs like right, you know, in the middle, happy reel, something driving, you know, they all know

**Charlie Pilzer**

But it's interesting sometimes what they think of as a slinky jig. It's not what I think of as a slinky jig. You know that they'll say smooth-- ya know, smooth for them may not be smooth for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right and then there's tunes that can sound smooth depending on how you accompany them.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Exactly. Exactly. Or how the fiddle player plays them.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Really very much depends on which is why do you look at the card at all in your work?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Sometimes. Sometimes because it'll give a sense you know, if I, if I look at I see oh, there's a figure eight or there's a Mad Robin or there's a hey, now that'll give me one idea for tunes if I see it's balance and then this and balance and then that and then balance and, you know balance in an ocean wave with, you know that you know, roll away with a half sashay. No, you know I'm blanking on the tune, the jig.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, oh, oh yes, what jig? I don't think I can help you.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Rory O'More. Yeah, you know, so balance, roll away. Balance roll back. I mean, that's a whole different kind of tune. Yeah, there are these, there are contra dances that are contras, contras that are sort of squares, but they're really contras. But then all of a sudden, there's a square move in the middle of it. You know, that, you know, you have contras of the cross trail through and it's like, what? But, but that's but that suggests playing a whole different kind of tune. You know, are you gonna to play the tune half fast, you gonna play it lickety cut. Those are the two clog speeds.

**Julie Vallimont**

So what would make a tune good for that kind of dance in your mind? Like what are the characteristics of a tune that would be that I mean, we all know it I like old time tunes are good because they don't have a lot of notes because of how their rhythms go.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Well, actually old time tunes have lots of notes. They don't have a lot of rhythmic changes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, interesting. say more.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Okay, so if you think, if you think about old time fiddling, the big thing in the old time fiddling is their little shuffle, you know, dumpity, dumpity, dumpity, dumpity, dump. But no matter what tunes are playing, that their whole bow is kind of doing that thing which has kind of an impetus. You know, in the way you write the tune, the old tunes are written are written to promote that, that feel, that drive.

**Julie Vallimont**

So it's like rhythmic engine that's underneath the tune, right?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Right. And so, you know, the dancers move to music... there are other tunes I call like chug tunes. You know? Where you know, you kind of dance one but you aren't moving fast, it's just you get in a groove, you know, just.... You know, these are tunes that don't have a ...Oh what's a good....... I'm trying to think what's a good chug tune. You know, they don't have a big.... there'll be things like dorian tunes, you know where they'll be, you know, a bunch of D minor than a C major chord, you know, just

**Julie Vallimont**

So it's something like Growling and Grumbling.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, Growling and Grumbling, that's a good good example of a chug tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, we soon as a fiddler is switching to that tune whole rhythm changes.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Right. Then there are trance tunes. You know, which, you know, they tend to be, you know, more flowing, where the dancers just, you know, they just kind of continually flow from one thing to the other but they aren't like chugging along, they just they're flowing along, a lot of English tunes could be trance tunes. Classic, which you think is classically if you'd like to go back to Swinging on a Gate or Dominion Reel or Teetotallers, you know, they have yet a different kind of beat where you know, they're kind of almost you know, where things are deliberately stepping one after another, but you aren't in a groove as much as you are in motion. They're marches. You know, take like Shadrack's Delight with you know, it has down the hall, you know, four in line down the hall, you know, turn single, come back. Marches fit good for that, because that's the kind of motion.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Charlie Pilzer**

I mean, I, you know, so if I look at a card, that's the kind of things I'm looking for is you know, I say Oh, if I see you know, a marchy kind of move, you know, or all right so for example,other moves about how I would match a tune. So a figure where like, you know, you left allemande halfway, go that next, right allemande, on to the next, third one turn all the way around, come back, swing. That one is that Steve Zakon-Anderson Three Thirty-three, whatever that is. I think that's what that does. You know, when you go around

**Julie Vallimont**

There's a lot of this.

**Charlie Pilzer**

So you know you think about that. That's the same as doing, you know, a circle left and right, in a square dance. Meet your partner halfway, you know, people are going, you know.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like functionally.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah. And so that you tend to think of the dance the same way. You don't think about it that way?

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know how I think about it.

**Charlie Pilzer**

I mean, I do, I mean, I mean, I do think I mean, so if I look at that and try and figure out what what tune is going to go with this dance. And in some ways it's the other way around. Sometimes we'll just pick a dance, I'll tell the caller .... I mean, I'll tell them ahead of time. This is, we want to end with these two medleys, here's the kind of tunes they are. Let's figure out some dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I just I'm sitting here listening to you. I'm just thinking like, I can't imagine Bob McQuillen talking about trance dances, and Cchug tunes and you know.....

**Charlie Pilzer**

Totally not. Okay. But think about...... So think about to large part what his repertoire was. Particularly in.... call it the last 30 years that he played. So when he and Pete Colby and April Limber played, then, you know as the New England Tradition, and then it was Jane Orzechowski and Mac and Deanna Stiles and the Rhythm Rollers was Kathy Whitesides and Laurie Anders and Mac. An awful lot of the tunes were Mac tunes, and all Mac tunes have a certain classic style. You know, he didn't write trance tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

That 1-5-1 cadence at the end and like that whole thing.

**Charlie Pilzer**

If you could swing your camera around and I mean, you know, there's all my little Mac books all like.... you can take a photograph of it, but you see, hey're all right there. So, no, I mean, his was the opposite way around. And I ....you should go talk to some callers. It's my guess,my hypothesis that if you were a caller knowing you were going to go call a dance with Bob McQuillen playing piano there's a good chance you would set up your dance so it would work with Bob McQuillen tunes and it would work with all classic four on the floor, New England tunes and you don't worry about old timey tunes, you don't worry about Quebec tunes, you don't worry about trance tunes. Because he didn't vary the style but it's ..would that be popular with contemporary dancers? With some it would be, with some it wouldn't. Some people like classic stuff like that, but when you you know if you look at McQuillen and I have to say he really sort of fell into a category of one, you know, there is only one McQuillen. I, I, honestly..... Who would fall into that category now? Of people.....I'm trying to think of who's performing now who falls in that category of being so classic.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, I think Rodney Miller.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Rodney is probably.

**Julie Vallimont**

Although it's ironic to call him classic because I think a lot of his reputation was built on the new things that he did in his fiddling style.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, but now, what is funny if you listen to Airplang now is still an excellent record. But it sure is not the cutting edge thing it was at the time.

**Juli Vallimont**

So everyone's doing it, you know,

**Charlie Pilzer**

and more. Yeah, Rodney. Dudley.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Dudley's mostly doing more barn dance.

**Charlie Pilzer**

More barn dances, Yeah, he used to be more in this kind of the mainstream. We go back and look at the Canterbury Orchestra. Yeah, records and when we used to call to compare it to what he does now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, he either chose to move or ended up moving or some combination of those things into this niche.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Oh, I think it's a very deliberate choice on his part. You know, he wants, he wants to be the iconic old man of New Hampshire.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that's his wheelhouse. You know, like, going around in. I mean callers, modern callers have to collect choreography and stay hip with all that stuff. And they have to always be like...

**Charlie Pilzer**

Or make up dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or make up dances or whatever. And they have to be working with certain bands. And, you know, I think he's, he's got his thing that is iconic. Like you said.

**Charlie Pilzer**

You know, he was doing 200 and 250 gigs a year, you know, he's working more than anybody. Who else do I think of now, I mean, there are people over the years. You know, when you think of callers, you start with Ralph Page and Ted Sannella and Tony Saletan and who else...Who would I recall? I mean now Tony Parkes, you know, is still, you know, been around for years, still excellent caller. I, you know, I just think he's so good. I mean, who you know, who were some of the players who've been around all those years, Donna Hébert's around, George Wilson, Vince O'Donnell. You know, he's an icon and in the Boston area and not all that well known outside.

**Julie Vallimont**

Randy Miller is another person. I think he plays less contras these days. .... than he used to but....

**Charlie Pilzer**

You know, but he's, you know, he's he's a great resource on tunes... because

**Julie Vallimont**

He wrote the book.

**Charlie Pilzer**

He wrote the book, maybe in a couple of books.

**Julie Vallimont**

And he was one of those people like actively bringing Irish tunes into the new repertoire and things like that they kind of. It's so funny. We just, I just think it's so weird that we just assume we can like, let's play this tune from this country, and this country, and this country. What a weird tradition that is. It's so normal for contra musicians to do it now. We don't even think about it. But it's because there were people who were, I mean, tunes move around anyway, like, as people immigrate, they bring the tunes so it's not like these have all lived in New England forever. There were, you know, English and French and Irish and Scottish tunes and just coming to, Cape Breton tunes, coming to New England because people moved here, but I think that's different from like, actively just going out and listening to an album and be like, let's play this for a contra dance. That is like totally the new normal.

**Musical Interlude (***New England Tradition- Bob McQuillen, Jane Orzechowski, Deanna Stiles*)

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, let's see. Let's uh, are there any other things we want to touch on before we wrap up because we had a nice little jaunt? Hinterlands.

**Charlie Pilzer**

We go back to piano. So what more do you want to know about piano?

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm curious, maybe to have you talk about the Festival Orchestra a little bit while we're on that.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Okay

**Julie Vallimont**

You've been leading the Festival Orchestra for a number of years now.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah. It's quite an honor, I keep thinking one year they're gonna say, Okay, Charlie, you've had enough, time to put you out to pasture.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who was leading it before you?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Who was leading it before me? Well, I mean, the people are leading these days, Lisa [Greenleaf] does it, Debbie Knight.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Roaring Jelly. She has a whole band that's like a permanent festival orchestra.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Bruce Rosen led it for a while, but he decided he'd rather play piano than lead the orchestra. I'm trying to think I'm trying to think of like who led the....

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, how long have you be leading. it's probably been a while.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Five years maybe. Yeah. I've been playing in it longer than that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah

**Charlie Pilzer**

I try and think, all right, so...

**Julie Vallimont**

This wouldn't be that hard for me to find out.

**Charlie Pilzer**

No, it wouldn't it be that hard. So here's the thing that the, I mean, the big session, I'm always thinking. it's the one that's the last one. You know that...

**Julie Vallimont**

The Sunday afternoon. A big thing where there's The Merry-Go-Round

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, so for years and years and years, you know, I mean, that was the Festival Orchestra was led. The key players was was Bob McQuillan was always playing piano. For years at first, you know it was April Limber, you know? And Pete [Colby] until they passed away, you know, they would be the key. And then for a lot of years it's Jane Orzechowski and then Vince [O'Donnell], you know and so in recent years the combination been Vince has been playing fiddle and Bruce Rosen plays piano.

**Julie Vallimont**

Amy Cann is always there.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah. And now in the last few years, I've been making up the medleys and figuring it out and actually put thought in and I write the callers ahead of time and kind of figure out you know what dances the callers want and I've been you know people are pulling a lot of contemporary tunes I've sort of gone backwards, you know, it's like, alright, let's do some Ralph Page, here's a here's a Ralph Page medley let's do a McQuillen medly. Let's, you know, let's find some of those tunes that people haven't played. I mean in a way you could play the same tunes year after year, you know, and people will get better but there's, there's, for me, there's there's a multiple challenge and picking the tunes and making up arrangements is you want to do something that's fun for the musicians. That's fun for the dancers. And primarily is functional for all. You know, so you so, you know, when, I don't know a year or two ago, I used Oddville Cupola and I handed that out to the Festival Orchestra and everybody goes... what? You know, and I talked to Bob Isaacs, you know, I said, Well, okay, so it's a 64 bar tune, you got to go through the tune, the dance twice to go once through the tune. He says, I got it, he says, since you don't even need a second tune, I just want you to play this one tune, and it's this whole kind of trancey you know, it's it's sort of odd tune. You can talk about tunes. So, so the thing that makes Oddville interesting is, there are quarter note tunes and eighth note tunes, most tunes are eighth note tunes. This is a quarter note tune. The great thing about quarter note tunes, they're accessible to everybody.

**Julie Vallimont**

In terms of your technical skills.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, you don't have to have a lot of technical skill to be able to play quarter note tunes effectively.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. I mean, it's true that like a lot of the traditional New England tunes we think of are actually quite hard to play when you finally sit down to play them.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Some of them are impossible to play,

**Julie Vallimont**

Like President Garfield's Hornpile . You know, but a lot of them are.... some of them are beautifully simple, but a lot of them take, they're not actually easy to play but they sound simple, and that makes you think that they play simply but they don't. Anyway, it's an interesting observation.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah. I mean tunes that ....., I mean, some like Little Burnt Potato. It's hard but it has a little twiddle de da da da......... you know, it's a slow chromatic twiddle that's part of the tune, but it actually makes it hard if you have trouble sliding your finger on the half steps on on a fiddle. I think it has a odd ... think has an odd string cross too, if you, I mean, if you don't play the fourth finger E is hard. You know? You're right. But so you know, so if I teach a beginning band class a lot of tunes I pick. I'll pick quarter note tunes, because they're easier to teach. And people don't have to be real..... they don't need a lot of technical chops to be able to make effective, fun sounding melodies. And, you know, then you just think for the Festival Orchestra, just think of spontaneous things, odd things to do, you know, play this chord, do this, you know, stop here, listen to that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that stuff more dramatic than what he would do as a regular piano player for, like, would you do that stuff if you were in a band? And like you know...

**Charlie Pilzer**

It all depends on the dance and who I'm playing with. Yeah, probably not. Yeah, I mean, a lot of it is effective, because it's a big band.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. And because there's a lot of dancers and because it's Sunday in NEFFA and all these

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, exactly. I mean, some of the things, some of the tricks, some of the tricks, like some of the harmonic tricks or things that I already know, because of stuff I've done, and I know this is a cool sounding thing. It's like, play this and they'll go.... What? Just Just do what I say.... play that. And then everybody goes, oh....

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. I love that you're picking these older tunes that wouldn't....there's there's a bunch of these kind of New England tunes or French Canadian tunes that have become in the New England style like bop da da do da do. Like Gaspe Reel and all those things. They're kind of traditional now, you know, and they don't get played otherwise, like, if they didn't show up, like the Flurry also has a roots band, but it's less traditional tunes than the Festival Orchestra, but aside from some places like this, these tunes don't get played that often and a big....

**Charlie Pilzer**

Well, I don't know, I play them all the time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. But where most like where do most contra dancers go where they would be exposed to these tunes?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Things like NEFFAs.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So I think it's really great that they're still

**Charlie Pilzer**

I don't know, I mean, if you go if you go to a dance weekend, are you going to hear those tunes?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, no.

**Charlie Pilzer**

That's why I don't get hired.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I mean, this is the crux of what this whole project is about is like, musicians, we do what we want for ourselves, like we play music, hopefully that is musically satisfying. We also are being respectful, just trying, most of the musicians are also trying to be respectful of a tradition that we are inheriting and passing on.

**Charlie Pilzer**

And some are more more respectful and more knowledgeable.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Than others. And the beauty is that it doesn't have to matter if you know about the tradition as long as you're playing for good contras, but enough people have to know about the tradition. But then there's also we have to do what the dancers want, or we don't get hired. And that's tricky. And there have been some I mean, I don't want to go too into personal territory, but there you know, it's, it's interesting when, like, there are these icons in the world who have devoted a lot of their lives to this tradition to contra dancing and stuff, and then all of a sudden, they find they're no longer relevant. And that happens, you know, but

**Charlie Pilzer**

Okay, so so I know exactly the thing. So, as you know, I played for your ....I don't know, maybe I said this in the last... I thought I said this the last interview, you know, Spælimenninir, when we first played years ago, we're ruining the ruining folk music. And then, you know, 40 years later, thank goodness for Spælimenninir. They're preserving data. We haven't changed at all right. But the whole world's drifted past us.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right Yeah....... interesting. And so Ralph Page dance weekend is so important for me for these tunes to have like a home and I noticed the style of dancing is different around the Page. That's kind of the things that make me wonder is

**Charlie Pilzer**

Actually I've never been there.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's wonderful. It's one of my favorite festivals ever. And the dancing is amazing. But in a totally different way than people think of amazing dancing. I think people will think of amazing dancing, they think of like dipping and flourishes and I think Ralph Page dancing is amazing because everybody is on time and they all look out for each other.

**Charlie Pilzer**

For that matter, for that matter I've never been to the Dance Flurry.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Charlie Pilzer**

I mean it's just it's a circle that you know I don't exist in.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah and so you know you get these like dance weekends and the kind of music they want for dance weekends is different than the kind of music that you want for your community dance.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Depends on who's booking the community dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, or who's booking the dance weekend I guess, you know.

**Charlie Pilzer**

And dance weekends come and go.There's a local DC area, well, actually there are two local DC area weekends that totally struggled this spring, one cancelled and one went ahead. I don't know if either one will even try to self assemble for next year.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. What do you think that is from?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Well, a couple of things.

**Julie Vallimont**

I know this is like a, this would be a whole other interview.

**Charlie Pilzer**

A whole 'nother interview.....so here's a good topic for you to ask other people.... their views. So I think dancing in general, more specifically contra dancing is cyclical. You know it all but died out in the 60s. If it wasn't for Ralph Page and Ted Sannella, you know, and eventually Dudley, it wouldn't have survived. Those, I mean, you know, I'm sure other people have documented that's a lot better than in my confused head. But those guys, you know, really Ralph and Ted, I'm trying to think maybe Tony [Parkes] and Tony [Saletan], who else preserved it? You know, but there, there almost were no contra dances. You know it didn't begin flourishing nearly until the latter half of the 70s and the 80s. You know, then it peaked. And now it seems to be on the decline again. On the other hand, it's in more places, there are more dances you could go, but I think a lot of dances everywhere struggling. And think about the fact that, you know, the Monday night dance at Scout House, how many years has that been going on?

**Julie Vallimont**

A long time. But it's very different now than during the peak of the Yankee Ingenuity

**Charlie Pilzer**

Exactly. And why is that? People age out, the next generation is doing something different. You know.

**Julie Vallimont**

And, there's often a bunch of factors that they all play together.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Greenfield, Massachusetts, you know, the, you know, David's [Kaynor] Friday night dances, had huge draws, you know, they've been, you know, they were all on the decline. But you know, but then other dances that the Greenfield Grange are doing okay. You know, and it's there, there's a little bit of, of a missed generation, missed generation they don't quite get. So if you think of contra dancers to me, of course, they're all baby boomers because that's my peer group. There's a fairly active group of millennials.

**Cecily Pilzer and Julie Vallimont**

Who were raised by the baby boomers.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, in some places, they reject it. In some place they don't. But I think there's less Gen Xers involved.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I don't see a lot of people in my age group dancing.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Of course a bunch of them have families and dogs.

**Julie Vallimont**

The child bearing years, the adulting years.

**Charlie Pilzer**

But on the other hand, things like family camps are, you know, still seem to be successful. But other camps are not as successful. Partly because there're more camps, it's more spread out. You know, at one time, the only camps were like, you know, if you didn't go to Pinewoods, where else was there, what there were no Bay Area camps. There was no camps in Michigan, there was nothing in Texas. You know, there was nothing in the Pacific Northwest. And then, you know, things have gotten more expensive so that for some dancers taking a week off to go to a week long camp is not as attractive as it might be to take off two weekends. And where are they going to go? Well, they're not going to go to the traditional weekends because that's where the baby boomers are. Let's go dance with ourselves, so we'll go make our own weekend and we'll go dance at X Y or Z. I mean, think about where you get hired, you know, where Buddy System gets hired, right? Who runs them? Younger people, older people, are they more traditional long.....

**Julie Vallimont**

Variety, lot of

**Charlie Pilzer**

More newly organized camps, I would think.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of the dance weekends seem to be mostly run by baby boomers who, we play in some communities where they're actively trying to recruit. They're like, look, here's the young person on the committee, you know, where they're actually trying to recruit younger people. Some weekends are run by younger people. Weekends that are specifically youth focused tend to try to book up and coming bands. And we're not

**Charlie Pilzer**

All a good thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Which is wonderful, but we're not up and coming so we don't actually end up playing for those events which is pretty funny.

**Charlie Pilzer**

No, you're you're you're you're up and camed.

**Julie Vallimont**

Up and camed! Now we're down and went!

**Charlie Pilzer**

I'm down and went.

**Julie Vallimont**

(laughing) so funny......this phease “down and went “

**Charlie Pilzer**

Well, I don't know about you, no it's clear I don't know... For a dance weekend, you know, for like a three day event. I don't recall last time I was hired. Can you recall, Cecily? No there's been some others but not very many. It's certainly nothing probably within the last 20 years.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Why is that? You know....

**Charlie Pilzer**

You'd have to ask the dance organizers.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. This is a whole, this we could turn this into a whole other interview. Yeah, this is for someone else to explore. My job is to think about how the music...... like...

**Charlie Pilzer**

And maybe you said maybe my music's too..... my music's too square. And I'm not iconic enough.

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know though, right? Because if you're iconic, they keep you alive. It's a living fossil. I don't mean that in a denigrating way but that's kind of you know, you become the horseshoe crab for your generation. So, let me ask you this, what do you think people are playing for contras in 30 years?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Same thing they're playing now. In other words, what I mean by that is there are certain tunes, certain traditional tunes will continue to stay around, Chorus Jig and Money Musk and Swinging on a Gate and Temperance Reel and St. Anne's Reel are not going anywhere. Opera Reel. Those tunes are always going to be around. Yeah, they'll be certain composed tunes that join the the canon of they're always going to be around. Yeah, I think of say a tune like Dancing Bear.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's old school now, it's so funny.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Or Fair Jenny's Jig , other ones, hard to say what's gonna last. It could be something like Bus Stop. I don't think it's gonna be Catharsis because I think it's too hard for some fiddle players.

**Julie Vallimont**

Flying Home to Shelley

**Charlie Pilzer**

Flying Home to Shelley probably may stay around based on. Maison de Glace. You know, some of the French Canadian tunes and part of it depends, you know, who hands the tune, to who hands the tune to whom. You know, it's the same thing you think of the lossese Amelia is considered, you know, traditional tune; of course it's not, it's a Bob McQuillen tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

it's not that old relatively speaking.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Relatively speaking. Larry's. [Unger]....... was it Jim and Judy's

**Julie Vallimont**

Jim and Judy's Wedding?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, or Two Rivers or Ashokan Farewell. But then you think about say, Jay [Ungar], think about some of Jay's other tunes. Whodoo Hoedown. who plays that? It's a totally cool tune, but it's hard.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, maybe Vladimir's Steamboat. So around there. I don't hear people play it as much anymore.

**Charlie Pilzer**

No.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's interesting. And these tunes are all in the Portland collections. So they're there. Yeah, but they tend to kind of fall in and out of....

**Charlie Pilzer**

Right. And Portland collection has is both been a tremendous accomplishment. You know, it's great to have all these tunes in one book, on the other hand everybody just goes and looks at that book. You know, there are a whole lot of other tunes that aren't in here. And some of the tunes that are in there are slightly idiosyncratic.

**Julie Vallimont**

And the versions of tunes that's exactly the versions that are tunes. And they're like, Oh, so how, like, they got it from the person who submitted to them or chose a version for a particular reason.

**Charlie Pilzer**

They did go back and vet. The ones that are composed, they actually, I understand I understand that Sue [Songer] and [Clyde] Curly did go back and actually asked the composers, is this how this tune goes? I was very interested in rehearsal with some people are playing on Steve Rosen's Nail that Catfish. And when we stopped and actually looked at the tune, we realize nobody plays the tune right.

**Julie Vallimont**

The way he wrote it.

**Charlie Pilzer**

If in fact, if you play the tune exactly as written. It's actually even cooler than the way most people play it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So we're losing a little something.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah. So that I've actually putting some push back on.... no, no. actually go look how it's written.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's a few versions of like Golden Ticket floating around too, right? Yeah, they've just lost a little bit of the magic.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Because, because they've filed off a corner that was hard, you know, or just they didn't think about it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, or.. Exactly. You, you know, that's how this whole process works. There's some times when we've contrafied tunes, and I think it makes them better contra tunes. You know, like, there's some Irish tunes that now have contra versions, but it makes them better phrased and easier to play. And yeah, you know, so it's a....

**Charlie Pilzer**

Well, you know, Not Enough Fiddles, we talk about that all the time. You know, we act, we actually have rehearsals, believe it or not.

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't believe it.

**Charlie Pilzer**

And at the rehearsals, we actually will look, you know, and sort of say, Well, this is how I played this, how I play it. Well, let's play it like this. You know, that there's and there's reasons why we do it this way. You know, and it's, you know, and it's like even my own playing I discovered, oh, I always put this chord here that someone just pointed out, you know, “I know you like that chord but you know, it just doesn't match.” And then when you sit down you actually listen to what's going on you go, “Oh, yeah, you know, I really shouldn't have played this...”

**Julie Vallimont**

I've done that too. When you're in a band with, six fiddles all of a sudden it matters because they're all trying to harmonize. Your role as a piano player is very different. There's like Josefin's Waltz, I add chords to it that I never thought about, I just always play him. The fiddler's always clash with me on this harmony line and this one part of the tune, it's like all the fiddler's are hearing or remembering this chord and I don't know what chords they are referring to, but I think of it as something different. You know, it's like that kind of thing happens all the time. Anyway.

**Charlie Pilzer**

So, So anyway, so what kind of tunes

**Julie Vallimont**

So you think there will still be tunes?

**Charlie Pilzer**

They'll be traditional tunes. Yeah, there'll be things that we think of as contemporary now will be traditional. And then there's going to be a whole bunch of tunes that we don't even know of.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or are they gonna be pop songs?

**Charlie Pilzer**

They could be. I mean, look at techno contra, you know, which is contra to EDM? Yeah, or contra and techno contras, they fall into two different categories for me which I don't know that the dancers quantify or let me say this a different way... so a lot of the DJs where I've heard of that, if some of it sounds very EDM where they even make up the stuff they do, where, you know, they come up..

**Julie Vallimont**

You're sequencing everything yeah.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Where they come up with the beats. Others are doing like a DJ mix where they're taking existing club stuff, you know, or not club stuff, you know, and mixing it and contrafying it. Then there's the stuff like you do, which, which I find a great mystery how you do it, where part of it is you have beats and sequences and stuff that you've developed, but then you play live on top of it. Which, to me is the most interesting, which is obviously from my point of view, that's the most interesting sort of stuff because there's a whole improvisatory aspect to it that is not as clear cut as just dancing to a sequence. Now, as in any club DJing if you have a good person DJing you know a techno contra, they may be matching the tunes to the minutem, you know,it's to the moment it's not something they've necessarily cooked up in their house although I know people who do that too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, they just play and go leave the stage.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yeah, but then other people you know are sitting there with you know, something like a Traktor or I forget what the what Traktor is one of the programs. What's another where you do you load like all the music in the slots..... It's like....

**Julie Vallimont**

Abelton is really good for that too, Traktor is better for some things DJ wise, but yeah, there's some people are doing live mixing, some people are doing crossfades live, but they've already worked them out in advance and they're just crossfading live, some people are writing their own music, less and less of that. You know, my approach was because I wanted to keep to me the magic of contras the relationship between the music and the dancers to keep the element and we tried not playing fiddle tunes, and we tried playing fiddle tunes, but people seem to respond to keeping the fiddle tunes in there. You know, I think there's something about a fiddle tune that works really well for contra dance... Who knew?

**Charlie Pilzer**

Well, I mean, there's absolutely no reason why EDM wouldn't work. I mean, you know, it's all for you know, a lot of EDM is fou on the floor music, it's...

**Julie Vallimont**

Structurally.

**Charlie Pilzer**

But it's not phrased. Remember I talked about is, you know, the that is both the beat-to-beat rhythm and then the phrased rhythm that makes music work for dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

And there's something about the energy of like, why do you you want to do this with a caller telling you what to do? You know, like.....

**Charlie Pilzer**

Well, so you don't have to think about it. I mean, you know, otherwise, how do you know what? How do you? You know, if you're a geek like me, how do you know the next thing to do on the dance floor? If you if someone doesn't tell me. Oh, yeah, I just stand there and move my feet and wave my arms. I don't know how to do that.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you think that tunes are going to be around to stay.

**Charlie Pilzer**

The tunes?

**Julie Vallimont**

Tunes.

**Charlie Pilzer**

Yes, tunes will be around to stay. I have no reason not to think so. I have many reasons to think that will remain true.

[End]

Thanks to David Millstone and Ellen Royalty for help in editing this transcript.