Contra Pulse Episode 4: Everest Witman

**Julie Vallimont**

Hi everyone. Welcome to Contra Pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This week we have our first interview since the COVID pandemic began. We haven't seen each other on the dance floor in a couple months, but that doesn't mean we can't talk about contra dancing. And it's fun to reminisce and also think about the future when we can be back to dancing again.

I was fortunate to be able to sit down on my front porch and have a chat with Everest Witman, who's a guitarist, mandolinist, and foot percussionist. Right now we're listening to a track from Everest’s band Nova called Redwood. Everest found the traditional music scene in his early teens, growing up in Brattleboro, Vermont, and quickly fell in love with music and dancing. He plays guitar in the DADGAD tuning and draws from a variety of musical traditions, especially contemporary Irish and Scottish to create a driving and satisfying backup guitar style. Now based in Montreal, Everest plays for contra dances all over the North American continent and beyond, most notably with his trio Nova featuring Kathleen Fownes and Guillaume Sparrow-Pepin. Nova has brought their great energy to many a dancehall, including dance weekends all over the country.

In this interview, we talked about Everest's early influences, especially not surprisingly, the band Nightingale, and how he got into playing for contra dances. We talked about DADGAD guitar and how he plays for contras and how that's different from session playing. And we have a good old rhythm player geek out session about ways that rhythm players can support the dancing and what he does on his instrument. And we talk about his current interests in and Scottish music and balfolk, and the way that those scenes are similar to and different from the American contra scene.

We're wearing masks in the interview. So apologies if it sounds a little muffled but it's good to be safe.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I am here with Everest Witman on this beautiful day. We are sitting outside on the porch at my house, and it's 70 degrees out and we are having the first social distancing interview on Contra Pulse. Welcome Everest Witman.

**Everest Witman**

Hi Julie, thanks for having me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Was it a hard commute to get here?

**Everest Witman**

Well, I had to walk a full two blocks. That's more exercise I've gotten in a few months.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Well, welcome. It is a beautiful day. And in the days of social distancing, this is a new experiment. Everest is wearing a wireless mic and sitting 12 feet away from me, and we both have masks on. But the sun is out. And it's beautiful. And there's birds in the background. And I'm actually kind of excited to talk about contra dancing because it's something we can't do right now. And it's fun to think about fun things. So hi, Everest. Why don't you tell us a little bit about how you got started or anything like that you want to share with us.

**Everest Witman**

Sure. So I grew up in Brattleboro, Vermont. When I was about 10 years old, my mother kind of discovered the contra dance and trad scene we have here. And I I kind of just got dragged into it with her. I started playing the guitar, originally in standard tuning, but I started going to the Putney Irish sessions weekly, just to listen mostly. And then Roger Kahle, who is the guitar player at that session encouraged me to bring my guitar and tune to DADGAD. He showed me some stuff and then there was going playing DADGAD at an Irish session. So that's how I kind of discovered trad music. I started taking a class with Keith Murphy and Becky Tracy as a kid. And I had some lessons from Keith.

**Julie Vallimont**

What class is that?

**Everest Witman**

That's a class that they do through the Brattleboro Music Center. And they do multiple of them. But I was in the kids, kids edition of that class.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, how old were you?

**Everest Witman**

I started when I was 11.

**Julie Vallimont**

And so was that like a traditional music kind of class it? Was it aimed at dance playing or was it more like traditional?

**Everest Witman**

It was both. So it was it was like a tune a week. And then at the end of the semester, we would rehearse our tunes and then have a performance sometimes for dance sometimes just like, I don't know what at a nursing home or something or at the farmers market. So mostly a repertoire class.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, fun. And then you said that your mom is the one who took you to contra dances.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, so we started contra dancing at about the same time and I got really into that. I was very inspired as a kid by going to the dance Flurry, as a 10 and 11 year old and seeing bands like Nightingale and Crowfoot and Elixir perform.

**Julie Vallimont**

I can't imagine seeing all that as a 10 year old what that would have been like.

**Everest Witman**

It was pretty mind blowing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, so many people that hall full of so many people like to go into that room, the main hall and see 1000 people on there dancing must be mind blowing.

**Everest Witman**

It's still a little mind blowing. Yeah, as you know, that's the biggest contra dance event we have.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. And you've now had the chance to grace that stage yourself.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, that was a great honor because as a kid, I went to Dance Flurry and dreamed about playing on that stage someday. And I managed to perform there. Two years in a row last year and the year before.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was that with your band Nova?

**Everest Witman**

That was my band Nova. Both years.

**Julie Vallimont**

Huh, yeah, it's an amazing feeling. You know, it's interesting how contra dance has so many forms. From your little local community dance or a family dance with like 10 parents and kids running around and doing Strip the Willow to this giant hall with a full sound system and two sound engineers and 1000 people in it.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, so the scale, the scale can be very small to very large. Both both are great types of events. Dance Flurry is a bit is a bit overwhelming in a lot of ways as a performer and just as an attendee.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Somebody told me once, they said it's like drinking from a firehose and that analogy has kind of stuck with me. Yeah. So, what kinds of music do you play for dancing? And how, like, how does being a dance musician affect your playing and vice versa?

**Everest Witman**

Yeah. So I also play trad music not associated with contra dancing, and both styles influence each other. So as a contra dance musician, I play a lot of Irish and Scottish tunes, less New England stuff, for example. And so I would say that I play, I play more like a contemporary Irish and Scottish player in the contra dance circuit than most contra dance players and then vice versa, compared to what if I'm playing at a session. I play a bit like a dance musician.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's interesting.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, so I definitely pull from both from both places. I think that there's a certain amount of, I think, especially in terms of rhythm, being a dance musician affects my trad playing. And vice versa. There's a certain there's a certain way that you do rhythm for a dance because you want to be very, very clear about where the beat is for the dancers. And also be clear about what the groove is you're setting and how you're accenting certain parts of the dance. And that's less of a thing that you might do in an Irish session where you can just you know, diddle along subtly and let the melody kind of steal the show.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So is that something like laying down a more definite groove?

**Everest Witman**

Yeah. So my playing is definitely very groove based for dancing. I'm just kind of like a machine. I lay down a groove and I keep, keep playing it until the dance ends. And there so yeah, you never leave much space when you're when you're playing for a dance because you don't want the dancers to lose the beat, unless there's something else going on with another instrument.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. So in your arrangements with Nova for example, do you generally have like one groove per set? Or will you change grooves when you change tunes in a medley or how does that work?

**Everest Witman**

That's a great question. So I think the overarching rule is that you want the groove or grooves that you choose for a set to fit to be able to fit one dance at a time. So if you choose a groove that's very bouncy at a part of the tune, let's say the A1. You might imagine that that would fit great with a dance with a balance at the at the A1. And then if you switch grooves in the middle of that set it still has to work with the dance that you've chosen based on that first groove. So if something is ... if you put a balance in a certain part of the tune, you have to keep it throughout the entire set, but it's okay for a groove to evolve the route so you can start with something simpler and kind of build it up or reduce it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you can either take one groove and play around with it. Or you could switch dramatically, like Nightingale was really known for that. And a couple sets where they're playing a normal tune and you just know it's not gonna stay that way for very long. And then something's gonna happen. Like the set where they would play the Flying Tent you know.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. And Jeremiah comes in with that crazy syncopated groove.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. But both of those elements have to fit the dance.

**Everest Witman**

That's right. An easy way to do that is to start with a fairly neutral groove which can fit anything and then you come into something that's a little bit more groovy and syncopated and intense. I think I think something that we do a lot as Nova is to play tunes very straight for the first tune. So in the last tune, we have some type of crazy groove on top of it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Why do you take that approach?

**Everest Witman**

I think I think dancers like it when music is always building. And it's a little bit, it's a little bit harder to get away with a drop in energy than an increase in energy. So we start so we start. We start at a low level, and then we kick up the energy from there. Some bands get away with major drops in energy while they play, like Great Bear was really famous for...

**Julie Vallimont**

Throwing you off the cliff. And usually they catch you on the other side, but not always.

**Everest Witman**

But yeah, we do less of that. So our tendency is to always just increase.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So when you talk about groups as a guitar player and because of the way we're doing things now, these interviews will be in two parts. And so you don't have a guitar with you right now. But it's a kind of like a strumming kind of groove. Like, it's not like a hits kind of half time groove. Is there any, can you do an interpretive dance of it or anything to help our listeners understand?

**Everest Witman**

Well, if you imagine that my, my hands are my guitar, I'm doing this all the time. Constantly strumming. So I strum every single beat. And if I want to layer some sort of syncopation over the melody, I vary how much I how much I emphasize certain strokes. And so that's how I lay down a groove on the guitar. I also have the ability to damp the strings and that can make kind of like a snare type sound on the instrument.

**Julie Vallimont**

So cool. That's the one thing I have envy of that the piano can't do.

**Everest Witman**

That's something that the piano can't do. I mean, maybe on an acoustic piano, you can reach over dampen the strings...

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot. You'd have to have a big arm to dampen all those strings. Yeah, you could play prepared piano, but I love the way the fretted instruments can damp their strings like that. So, so damping is when you press down on the strings that stops them from resonating and cuts off...

**Everest Witman**

It creates a very, like sharp, progressive sound.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it almost doesn't even have a pitch. You know, I think lots of people have done that. But I think we're talking about Nightingale’s Flying Tent I'm pretty sure there's some of that on there, too. I think Keith is doing some on the mandolin. I haven't listened to that recording for a while, but…

**Everest Witman**

That's something that Keith does, too. It's kind of a staple of his groove. Yeah, Johnny Cash actually would put a 1 dollar bill through his guitar strings, and then just play his guitar like a snare drum because that kind of just damps, dampens the strings of the guitar with that, and then he can just, you know, focus on playing, playing a rhythm. So I'm doing that but just kind of intermittently.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And then do you also do foot percussion?

**Everest Witman**

I do foot percussion too. Yeah, I would say that Keith Murphy kind of popularized doing foot percussion for contra dance music, even though it's a tradition that comes from Quebec.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's interesting was that Keith?

**Everest Witman**

I would, I think it'd be safe to say that, that Keith originated that fad. Or that trend? I don't think it's going away.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It'd be interesting because it's a it's an old tradition, and a lot of different places in Quebec music and, you know, all sorts of things. And it's been in New England for a while. That's a very interesting question. But certainly, like within the realm of New England, contra dancing in terms of popularizing that. I think that's safe to say,

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, I definitely started doing some foot percussion because I saw Keith doing it. Yeah. I'm sure a lot of other people too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely. Keith was the role model for that for a lot of people, even if he wasn't the first one to do it, that's not completely relevant, right? The question is, you saw it and you were like, whoa. Like, I mean, Keith is known for just being like a rhythm machine. You know, as are you.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. Very similar. There's definitely a strong influence there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, The fun thing about these interviews is that you know, when I if I get to sit down with Keith or one of his bandmates, and talk to them, you know, I could be like, well, where did Keith get this from? And kind of trace these things. But we don't always know about. Do you have any, like defining moments that you remember when you saw something and you're like, I have to do that.

**Everest Witman**

Well, there's definitely that moment of going to Flurry. I would say that recently, I've had some formative experiences in Europe, discovering both contemporary Scottish music and also the balfolk scene. So I've spent some time in Glasgow these past few years. And the level of musicianship over there is just incredible. And a lot of the music coming out of Glasgow, and also Ireland and other parts of Scotland is very, very inspiring. Kind of on a different level from the trad music that we've heard from past decades, like Lunasa kind of defined. The last, I mean, I guess, the decade before last since we're in the 20s now of Trad, Irish music. But now there's new kind of edition of Lunasa and bands like that. So I've been very inspired listening to bands like Imar and Talisk, to name a few and wanting to and I've wanted to take some of their sound and incorporate it into my contra dance style. And then on the continent, there's a lot of really amazing French and Belgian music coming out of Europe, which is for the balfolk scene, which for people who don't know, it's kind of like the European equivalent of contra dancing, except that the music is rooted in traditional French music as opposed to other music from other areas of Europe, as opposed to New England and Irish and Scottish music. The dances are different. But the like, the vibe of the scene is kind of exactly the same thing. Same type of people same like, you know, dudesin tie-dye skirts cuddling in a pile.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's good to know that things don't change. Some things are universal.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, so there's a lot of bands over there that I've been inspired by like Naragonia, Trio Dhoore, Boom Chuck [CIACBOUM].

**Julie Vallimont**

That Trio Dhoore is spelled d h o o r e.

**Everest Witman**

And it's not pronounced Trio Dhoore in Flemish.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, but I don't speak Flemish.

**Everest Witman**

My best attempt would be Theodoore. I think I think that's the correct-ish pronunciation although I don't speak Flemish. So anyway, so those were those were formative moments for me. Yeah, discovering those worlds and kind of selecting pieces of those genres and bringing that back to my dance playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So let's unpack that a little bit. Going back to the Scottish scene that you're talking about, I mean, you don't have to be able to quantify music. You can just hear something and it galvanizes you and you don't have to know why. But what are the elements of that that you think are most relevant to bring into your dance playing?

**Everest Witman**

Well, this is less applicable for me, but a lot of the melody playing is a very fast, energetic and energetic and really precise.

**Julie Vallimont**

Good thing you're in a band with Kathleen Fownes.

**Everest Witman**

There you go. Yeah, I'm not I'm not doing the fast, precise melody playing, but it's definitely defined kind of my musical aesthetic. A lot of that repertoire.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sorry, just I was thinking about tempo for a second, is fast in tempo or in notes and drive feeling?

**Everest Witman**

I would say mostly tempo here. Uh huh. So Nova is a band that likes to play faster than most contra dance bands.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you have like a beats per minute of what that might be?

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, so I would say that a lot of contra dance bands, especially from decades past, have liked to play in the ball park of like 108 beats per minute or 112 beats per minute, maybe 116 if they're going crazy. Nova, so we actually have a beat per minute tracker that we use sometimes to just have a look at where we are. So we don't go off the rails, but we tend to play our like, our like starting slow-ish tempo is 116 and then we'll go up to the high 120s.

**Julie Vallimont**

High 120s

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, if we really going crazy, we might be up to 128 which is quite fast. But I would say that we gravitate towards one tempo between one 116 and 120. And I remember actually that Nor'easter was notorious for playing at a faster tempo too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. I mean, this is your interview, not mine. But um...

**Everest Witman**

It's something that I always really appreciated about dancing to Nor'easter because I always felt like the tempo was a bit faster. And I really enjoy dancing to faster music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely. And I think the trick with that is we would start at a moderate tempo. Yeah, like 118 and wait until the dancers had the dance. And then sometimes you speed up intentionally. Sometimes it just happens with the excitement, between the musicians and the dancers, and we would always watch the floor. You know, sometimes one of us would be like, is this too fast? We put the brakes on or think about putting the brakes on but every time you put the brakes on, it just pulls some of the energy. It's really hard to do that without losing.

**Everest Witman**

Once you get going. You can't really pull back without losing something.

**Julie Vallimont**

I do remember one year, it was our first time playing the dawn dance. It's this 12 hour dance in Brattleboro. And we were of course, the graveyard shift. So it's like 6am. And the sun is coming up and we had just come back from Burning Man. And we were very, we're feeling our oats. We're very excited. And just the energy in that room. You just, in order to dance all night. You just have to keep going, going going. And Jeff Petrovich was calling it and he was calling all no walkthroughs. Sixteen dances in a row, something like that.

**Everest Witman**

Really a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

With no walkthroughs just to keep the dancers moving. It was insane. And so the only way we could deal with that is just to push the energy like crazy. And there was one point at which we were screaming from the stage and the dancers are screaming back. And I clocked the recording later because I made a little recording from the stage and it was 135. Which I would not do under any other circumstances except in that moment, but just to frame this tempo conversation. When I started playing for a contras I asked Lisa Greenleaf, the caller what her favorite tempo was. And she said about 117 this is standard like New England contra tempo. And so you guys like to play on this slightly...

**Everest Witman**

On slightly faster side. It kind of. I mean, we do, I would say that we're careful not to let the tempo get away with us or get away from us before the dancers have gotten the dance. But I think that it's our tendency to speed up because a lot of the music we're listening to, is at much faster tempos than 117, for example, especially jigs. If you're playing a jig, there's a lot, there's far fewer notes per measure than in a reel and so you can get away with playing it at like 135 without it sounding ridiculously fast, especially if you're a very smooth, precise melody player. So we're used to listening, listening to listening to jigs at like 135 and maybe playing the 135 in a session, but that that's not acceptable for a contra dance. And so we slow it down and we're still you know, 122 and it feels slow to us.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I've noticed that when I accompany pipers and other people and they play for the occasional contra dance we have to remember that the jigs go this lopy speed that they're not not used to.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. And the same goes for reels, like we'll still play a reel at 120 and think it feels slow compared to how we hear it in our heads.

**Julie Vallimont**

How do you know if the tempo is okay, is that your job as a rhythm player?

**Everest Witman**

It's mostly my job. Part of it is thinking about the number, so like the just the BPM if we have a BPM tracker out and knowing what generally acceptable ranges for a contra dance, but I think that the better. The better way to do it is to watch the dancers and see if they are managing to perform the moves of the dance on time at the tempo you've set. If a large portion of the dance floor is, is performing a balance late, for example, then you know you're going too fast. Because it's really the band's job to adjust to the dancers as opposed to the dancers trying to keep up with the band. There's a lot of, there's a lot of management that the band can take on, which isn't just the role of the caller, the band needs to be paying attention to the floor all the time, and seeing how the dancers are doing. And if the dances if the dance is moving too fast for the for the dancers, then the tempo needs to come down a bit before the caller, ideally before the caller has to tell the band to bring the tempo down.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Because some some callers don't want to interfere. And so they won't say something unless it's really dramatic. And by then somebody on the floor is probably already not having a good time. Yeah. Do you enjoy that role?

**Everest Witman**

I do a lot. It's a lot of things to keep in mind at once. But I think I find it very satisfying to be watching the dance closely and do something like watch for a specific movement in the dance and then change the music to fit it. And you can just tell that the dancers are getting a lot out of it if it's done, right. Like, for instance, if there's a petronella in a place the dance, which is a very, very notably balancing figure, I'll do that. I'll often do that dampening thing with my left hand to play that kind of snare sound on the guitar. To emphasize that moment, even if I wouldn't otherwise have chosen that for just the music by itself, and then that'll go really well with the petronella. And often dancers clapping afterwards. As opposed to having having dancers clap over on a piece of music that doesn't want to be clapped to. You can change the music and make it want to be clapped to, because dancers are going to clap on a petronella whether you want them to or not.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, they are. Yes, they are. Yeah, so it's interesting, like you know, contra music is so many things these days like modern countra music. And throughout this interview series you know, we've already spoken with like Dudley Laufman and Charlie Pilzer. And there's a lot of contra dancing that happens in different places and different sizes. There's all these different kinds of music and moods that we play for it. And you mentioned that you don't play New England tunes a lot.

**Everest Witman**

Not a ton, no.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Why is that?

**Everest Witman**

I would say that, just because of all the influence I have from playing Irish and Scottish music, there's less New England repertoire that's kind of on the tip of my tongue or in the stuff that I listen to.

**Everest Witman**

There's tons of great, classic New England tunes which people play all the time for contra dancing, which I which I know and pull out if I'm playing with a group of new people. But I feel like that that corpus of tunes is a bit smaller. Someone who knows a lot about New England repertoire might disagree. But I feel like there's a there's like a set of standard New England tunes. Probably if you looked at the tunes that Lissa Schneckenberger recorded on her on her album Dance. That would be like the set of classic New England tunes that people play for contra dancing all the time. And so there's lots of great ones. But there's just less of them than there are Irish and Scottish tunes. And especially contemporary tunes. I play a lot of a lot of contemporary contra dance tunes. And I don't know if I would classify them as classic New England repertoire. Like Keith Murphy compositions. I don't know if you could classify those as classic New England tunes. But they're like, the standard contra repertoire. We play a lot of them.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. I mean, what is the classic New England tune?

**Everest Witman**

Something like Fisherman's Hornpipe is what comes to mind.

**Julie Vallimont**

Fisher’s Hornpipe. Ba ba ba ba ba be ba doo. And then but there are these tunes that, like, what makes a classic New England tune is that it's old and from New England? Or is if you go to a typical concert, and you'll hear the band playing it, or if you go to a jam of contra dance musicians, you'll hear it. You know, there are a lot of very common tunes in the contra dance repertoire that are actually modern tunes written very recently, not in New England, like Bus Stop Reel and Flying Home to Shelley. And, you know, other things. And then there are Irish tunes that have made their way into what we consider classic like Lady Anne Montgomery. And then there's, you know, what we think of more as New England tunes.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. Yeah, at that point is just taxonomy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, right. Yeah. And it's, it's a stylistic thing, like, like when you say you don't play many New England tunes. That's not unusual for a contra band.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, interestingly enough. Like if you go to a square dance in Quebec you'll hear only traditional Quebecois tunes. Maybe some like recent Quebecois tune compositions. But if you go to a contra dance, you hear a giant mixture of tunes from different sources. It's pretty interesting. So I feel like I feel like the Contra dance repertoire is more of a melting pot than you have in other dance traditions.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it hasn't maybe always been that way completely, but it is now, like that is the normal for many places. And and I think that's kind of cool about contra dancing. You know, you could play a tune from Quebec, and then a tune from Appalachia and then a tune from Scotland or Ireland. And, you know, when you say, Oh, I'm really into French balfolk tunes. No one's gonna bat an eye at that and be like, what you weirdo. You know, or they're not gonna say, well, that's not traditional. Some people might. Some people I mean, there are contra dances still that feel like New England contra dances. They dance different dances, they dance differently. They might be a little slower and they play different music.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. I'm thinking of like Nelson New Hampshire for example. Yeah, that's like a contra dance frozen in time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you enjoy dancing at those kinds of dances?

**Everest Witman**

I think that from a curiosity and historical perspective, yes. But I really I think that I really enjoy contemporary contra dancing. Most of all, I think I think that a lot of that contra dancing has has innovated a lot over the past, I don't know several decades and I personally enjoy the way that it has changed compared to what people were dancing back in the 60s or the 70s, like faster music, more interesting choreography. And also the music has, has in my opinion improved. Since, since back then, like I'd much rather dance to something like Nightingale than you know, boom-chuck piano with a fiddle which is lovely but isn't quite as exciting.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. And so Nightingale is an example is bringing a lot of different things to the table at once. There's the, just the sheer musicianship of their playing. You know, like there's a difference between someone who has a day job and then plays fiddle at night playing for contra dances, which is so important. And, you know, like, I don't want to get on a whole soapbox about that. But is it like, are you, different people want different things out of their music, right? Some people want it to sound perfect. Some people want it to be from the heart. Some people just want that nice energy that doesn't take a lifetime of skill to have. But Nightingale, they have that precision. And then also like their arrangements and the concepts worked out in their arrangements.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, I find the complexity of arrangement in contemporary contra dance to be very compelling.

**Julie Vallimont**

As a dancer?

**Everest Witman**

As a dancer, and also just as a listener. I mean, it's hard to separate the two for me. And as I as I've evolved and started playing music for contra dancing much more than I contra dance. I'm definitely thinking about the music from a more musical perspective, not just as something to dance to. But even particularly as a dancer, I really appreciate listening to a band like like Nightingale or Elixir, maybe like Wild Asparagus, for example. And, and dancing, dancing to lots of different grooves and ideas. And you can be dancing and then something happens in the music and can be very exciting.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, so you play the kind of music you'd want to dance to? Go figure.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, I think it's I think it's generally true that the dance that the bands that I like dancing to the most are made up of people who are dancers or were avid contra dancers back in the day. Like the members of Wild Asparagus used to contra dance all the time. Before they were, before they were a dance band. And so they they know what they like to dance to back in the day. And the same and the same goes for other bands. Yeah, and Nova kind of grew out of us being passionate dancers and wanting to make music that was exciting to dance to, even though we dance less now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's interesting, like, bands like Wild Asparagus. You know, they're one of the first touring bands from New England, and they were some of the first folks and Swallowtail and that that scene to bring in all these other influences. You know, also Randy Miller, you know, studying Irish music and bringing a lot of Irish tunes as a contra repertoire. You know, it seems like there was a whole, like a kind of generation, so to speak of musicians who did that. And then for this generation of contra musicians, it's just what you do.

**Everest Witman**

It's just what you do. You play like Irish and Scottish tunes for contra dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Tunes from Quebec, tunes I mean, Quebec's a little closer, like, like the Maine and Quebec connection is quite close. But Irish and Scottish I mean, it's not even as much that there's Irish immigrants playing for contra dancing is that our contra musicians are going out and seeking out Irish and Scottish tunes and actively bringing them into the repertoire. You know, and David Surrette did his book of balfolk tunes years ago. And, you know, Nightingale played many French tunes. We keep talking about Nightingale, but we're sitting here in Brattleboro, it seems impossible not to talk about Nightingale when we talk about your early influences.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, so Nightingale was definitely a big early influence for me. But now I would say that that I'm more inspired by a lot of the contemporary Irish and Scottish music and balfolk music that I listen to. Then when I think about it, that's, that's the type of stuff that was inspiring Nightingale back in the day. They were listening to balfolk bands and taking French tunes and playing them for contra dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So what do you do? You talked about this a little bit, but what do you do to take a tune from a different dance idiom and make it work for contra?

**Everest Witman**

Well, you first have to make sure that it's an acceptable tempo. There's a lot of stuff. So in like, for example, in the balfolk tradition you might play reels for for schottische which are slow reels. So you could take that tune and speed it up to contra dance tempo, like 96 beats per minute, or 100 beats per minute is a pretty standard schottische tempo. That wouldn't really, that'll be too slow for our contra dance most of the time. So you could take that tune and play it at 112 or you could take a mazurka which is which is a dance and three in play it just like a waltz. Which is something that Nova does a lot. We play a lot of mazurkas as well.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah mazurkas are great. So do you have a schottische in mind that we could sing a little bit of to get an example?

**Everest Witman**

I don't think I do. You have one in mind?

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know. I'm trying to think. I have some uncommon ones in mind. Like there's one that Buddy System played as a contra dance team. And I just can't remember how it goes which is hilarious, we even recorded it. My brain has just been not in music land. It's pretty fascinating.

**Everest Witman**

Oh, yeah. Um, there's this tune that Nova plays called La Sansonette. Which is a classic.

**Julie Vallimont**

Ba ba ba ba da ba dabba daba da

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, that one. And so that's that's schottische tempo, but we just play like a reel.

**Julie Vallimont**

Schottische tempo would be like dum dum Boom, boom, boom, boom, bada boom,

**Everest Witman**

That's a little bit plodding. Great for schottische, but Nova, Nova just plays it like Bum Bum, bum bum ba ba dum ba ba ba, ba, ba ba ba boom with foot percussion. We make it sound like something totally different. But it's the tune we've taken from classic balfolk repertoire.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Yeah, there was a Buddy System recorded a tune from a French band. They're called Ballsy Swing, and I asked him if we could use their schottische and they said yes. And then we sent them a you know, we sent them an album to thank them. And he never heard from them. And I, I never know. I don't worry about this too much. But I always wondered if they just hated it because they had this beautiful Schottische with all this lilt and groove and it was kind of beautiful and sexy. And we turned it into this reel that stripped some of its magic away. But added a new kind of magic, right? And so, you know, it's just this brazen thing we do is we take all these things and we turn them into contra dance tunes.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. That's kind of, I mean, for me, that's that's kind of the big magic about plus for contra dances that I can take any genre of music that inspires me. And do that thing for contra dancing. You could even take pop music and play for contra dancing and lots of bands do. Like Great Bear used to play just straight up pop songs. Like the Daft Punk song "Get Lucky" they do for contra dancing. And it works great. It's awesome.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Do you like dancing to things like that?

**Everest Witman**

I love it. It's super. I would say it's, I mean, it's exciting. And it's refreshing, because I listen to pop music as well. And it's fun to be able to contra dance to pop music as well as, like New England tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's kind of like our modern version of singing squares, right? I mean, like singing squares to us are kind of chestnuts now, but they were just the songs that were popular at the time. And people wanted to go dance to their local pop songs. So in that sense, it's not that different. And it's not that scandalous.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, I would say that any scandal there was about taking a pop song and putting in a contra dance has been removed. It's just been done so much now. And then some some crazy individuals are even dancing the techno music and making techno music for contra dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes. crazy kids. Do you like techno contra?

**Everest Witman**

I do a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

What do you like about it?

**Everest Witman**

I would say that it's exactly how I wish actual clubbing was.

**Julie Vallimont**

(Laughing) I get this interview isn't about me, but that's why I started doing it. Because I love going to raves. But I hated the club scene.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, it's great. You get to dance to exciting electronic music and have crazy lights and stuff, except that you're going into a crowded sweaty place full of a lot of people that you probably know, doing a form of dancing that you already enjoy. And then in the techno music, there's a lot of allusions to the trad music that you're already excited about. So like even if you're a you know, if you're, if you're listening to a techno beat there's probably going to be a fiddle tune on top of it. So it's just, it's just the new and improved regular clubbing experience for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it's a safe environment.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. And there's no there's no alcohol. But yeah, that's okay.

**Julie Vallimont**

Despite the lack of alcohol, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I mean, there there's, I think we think of modern day contra dance as a dry activity, but it's not always and it hasn't always been, you know, depending on the community.

**Everest Witman**

That's an interesting thing. A difference that I see between the balfolk scene and the contra dance scene is that alcohol is a big accepted part of the balfolk scene. Like if you go to a balfolk dance, there's probably gonna be an open bar at the dance and people will you know, dance the dance, get a beer, dance, another dance. And do that for the entire night as alcohol is a bit of a taboo thing at a contra dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Do you see that at veillées in Quebec?

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, yeah. So you can drink at a dance in Quebec.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember seeing that too. There's a more of a party atmosphere. I feel like modern contra dance is they just want to get their dance on and they don't want anything to get in the way of it. They don't want the caller to talk too long. They don't want to wait too long. They don't you know, they just want to get right to it. And there's less of that party atmosphere.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. I, I personally enjoy both aesthetics. Yeah. That's, I guess that's what I, those are my thoughts on that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. You know, I am not a historian. And I'm sure someone like David Millstone or many people would, or the people who lived through it would know this more. But you know, I wonder if it's also like a lot of the contra dances around the country were formed with the Dudley dancers and the kind of hippie folk movement. And so I don't know if that's when alcohol became a thing that you don't have a contra dance or not. I don't know. Somebody write to me and tell me how I'm wrong, please. Thank you everyone. Yeah, so it's it's that it's interesting to watch. And for those of you who may not know a lot about balfolk, it's really a scene. And it's a scene where you pull in dances from different styles. You do different kinds of dances from France, you can do dances from Brittany, as opposed to like the rest of France. There's Ceilidh dances that happen there. And it happens throughout Europe. And it's like there's a lot of young people there, and they're magical and they often have cool lighting and a lot of atmosphere.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, that's another thing that's really inspired me about the balfolk scene is that, I mean, you do this at a techno dance but I wish that we could have like fog machines and crazy lights and pounding subs all the time of contra dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

Pounding subs!

**Everest Witman**

It's the best.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's funny that as you say that I'm sure there are some people who are listening and be like, nooooooooo.

**Everest Witman**

I personally love that.

**Julie Vallimont**

But you're ruining dancing! You know, and that's a, just so you know, that's a totally valid reaction to have. And that's the thing is that the contra dance, it exists in so many different forms right now. But we have to try to preserve all the ones we want to preserve. So that people now like, say you're in a band like Nova. I don't know if you will ever play like a beginner community dance anymore. I'm sure you have back in the day.

**Everest Witman**

Oh, yeah. And we've we've done some in the past few years for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you play differently for dance like that?

**Everest Witman**

I would say that it's mostly limited based on what the sound is like. I'm gonna do, so I generally play a lot with an octave pedal on the guitar.

**Julie Vallimont**

So that makes your bass an octave lower.

**Everest Witman**

Exactly. So it's like I'm playing a bass guitar at the same time just following along to what my guitar is doing. And that will work on an older sound system or a system that that may not have a sub. And so I'll do less of that, and I'll do a lot more of that if I'm playing with a sound engineer like Ed Howe who loves bass as much as I do. And we'll bring a sub or two, or four to the gig. I would say maybe we might play slower if that's the aesthetic that the dancers prefer. Because you probably know this, but dancers love to share their opinions about tempo with you.

**Julie Vallimont**

What? Yes, they do.

**Everest Witman**

So if we get enough people asking us to slow down we'll, we'll play generally slower for an evening.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So you'll play the same tunes. You'll just try to slow them down a little bit. You don't have a second, I know like, I have some bands that would play different tunes at a beginners dance. Like as a piano player, I might play differently.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah. Would you play more of a boom chuck piano style?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I would play more of a boom chuck piano style. Yeah.

**Everest Witman**

I might, I might kind of approximate that similar type of thing on the guitar, play less of a of a syncopated guitar style. And do more of a boom chuky or a really straightforward type of thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Simplify the phrasing.

**Everest Witman**

Yep Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you use chords as phrasing?

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, totally. So I feel like it's the job of the musicians to make the to make the dancers hear the phrasing, and eight part chunk, eight part chunks really, really, really well. And a good way to do that is to change chords. Only every four or eight measures. So I guess I What do I do specifically there? So there's, in tunes, you can often kind of compare phrases to questions and answers. So you leave a phrase hanging and then you let a phrase resolve. I try to consistently follow that. So for one eight bar chunk, I'll leave that phrase hanging on a four or five chord. In the next eight bar chunk, I resolve it. And that kind of blocks the pieces off in a way that the brain can handle. Because we're used to hearing questions and answers and music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and that helps your body subconsciously know where the phrasing is, you know, I think it'd be fun to take a poll of like, what do dancers anchor to while they're dancing? When I was a new dancer I listened for the bass lines. Yeah, like rather than the tune. That's how I found my way around.

**Everest Witman**

Yes, I would say that that's definitely what I do. Especially if you're listening to kind of a muddy sound situation. You can always hear when the melody went when when the bass line goes back to a one chord and then you know, the phrase just ended.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, yeah. And so you you're aware of that that power that you wield. I mean, I think us rhythm players, we enjoy our power. You know, and you know that you have that power to phrase things like I feel like the fiddle tune is important. Like if you took out the tune, the dance wouldn't feel the same. But the, the bass line is like the subconscious phrasing that can go underneath everything and help you anchor yourself. Yeah,

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, that's definitely what I think about the most. I'm definitely a bass line focused accompanist or rhythm player. I'm just thinking about where my bass line is going. And then the rest of the chord follows. That's that might also be a DADGAD thing. So ,So I play in DADGAD tuning, which compared to standard tuning I would say, encourages more vertical movement on the neck. And so you kind of just move where where your bass note is on the lowest string. And then the rest of the strings take care of themselves and create some kind of sus-y version of the chord you were defining with your bass note. So I just I just move around that bass note and the chords played themselves.

**Julie Vallimont**

So Dadgad is an alternate guitar tuning for those of you who don't know about that. And so rather than a standard guitar tuning, you tune the strings to D, A, D, G, A D. And so there's a lot of repetitions of strings and it sounds really good with open. It's very open sound. And so that makes the chords different on the neck of the guitar. And because you have that low D ringing there, you can just slide your hands like the patterns up and down the neck of the guitar, like you're saying. So it changes the kinds of bass lines you play. Yeah. And I think some DADGAD players, maybe not in contra dance as much. But in other traditions, they're kind of notorious for just changing chords whenever they feel like it. You know, it's part of the style to kind of anticipate a chord or jump around because you can just slide back and forth so easily. Is that different for you at a session than at a concert?

**Everest Witman**

That's a great subject you're bringing up because at a at an Irish session, especially in like Glasgow, for example. It's kind of guitar player code that you play a tune differently every single time you play it. You're constantly listening for new ways to interpret chord changes in the melody. So if a note flies by, let's say, like the sixth degree of the scale, you can latch on to it one time and play a four chord, the next time round, you don't or you anticipate it in some way. But for dancing, I think it's really important to play backup which is repetitive and predictable, and not a ton of stuff is going on because people are only half listening to you. You're trying to play to their subconscious because they're focusing on dancing, or most people are focusing on dancing. So I'm more likely to play a chord progression that's dislike 1-1-4-4-6-6-5-5 at a session you might be inclined to be like, oh, yeah, 1-4-1-6-5-3-1-4 all over the place. And so if I'm playing in an Irish session, I would say that I'm more of a predictable guitar player than a lot of the strictly session guitar players are because I like that predictability that I take from my contra dance playing. But then I also play, play more like a session player compared to my dance playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And it seems like you don't mind. Like you don't think of it as like simplifying your playing as much as it is playing for a different purpose.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah. It's not

**Julie Vallimont**

like you're like, Oh, I'm bored. I can't play any cool chords right now. It's more like you're doing something different.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. You have a different goal in mind, as opposed to entertaining the listener who's listening really closely to all your choices or entertaining yourself while you're playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or at a session you're entertaining yourself while you're playing.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah. as a as a dance player, I'm more focused on playing what the listener is not listening very closely wants to hear. As opposed to being interesting all the time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And ideas at a contra dance can, they're more repetition. They also need more repetition for them to get through to the dancers.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, honestly, I, if I'm playing a tune for contra dancing I won't make any chord substitutions after playing the pattern that I just played for two times to the tune most of the time. I feel like you have to do, for anything to register with the dancers, you have to do it consistently. At least two times to the tune. So if I wanted to substitute the six for the one, I would only do it after not making that substitution for at least two times to the tune. And then I would make that substitution consistently for another two whole times through the dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Where did that come from?

**Everest Witman**

I think that's a that's a philosophy that comes a lot from from from Keith. He, he's very consistent and believes in not throwing too much at the dancers at once. Yeah, also, I'm playing, playing simply but in a satisfying way. So that's something that I've definitely taken from his guitar style. And then also going and listening to a lot of players you play all over all over the place. I've reaffirmed that that's kind of what I prefer to listen to.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I also do the two times through thing for me it was Elixir, maybe Anna and Ethan. We were in a workshop and they mentioned that, and I kind of made a mental note of that. But it makes sense because the first time the dancers just need to experience it. But they can't respond to it yet unless it happens again. You know, so many times the band will get into some cool groove and my body would finally start to get into the dance, and then they would change it. And I'm like, noooooooo.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. Totally. I feel like there's a whole this like a dopamine system we have when we listen to music, which is you expect something and then it happens. And then you get a little dopamine spike. So by doing something interesting, you set you set up. So you do it once and your brain goes, oh, that means the listener’s brain goes, “oh, that was interesting. Let me listen to that again.” You do it again. “Okay. I see a pattern now.” You expect it the third time and it happens and you're satisfied.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. I think modern contra dances enjoy the element of surprise. But they want to be in on the surprise, most of the time. And so it's a fun, it's a fun kind of game to play of like, letting them in on the surprise. Like, if you're doing a build, they know something's about to happen. You know, like Nightingale would have these very dramatic surprises, but I always knew that something was coming. You don't always know when and that's what makes it fun. So do you play that way?

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, I mean, we definitely put those surprises in predictable places, if you're someone who's familiar with our arrangement. That's one of the joys I have of listening to, or dancing to bands that I'm familiar with, is that I know that that something crazy is gonna happen. And I can kind of hear it coming. Because I've already, I'm already familiar with their arrangement because I've danced so many times to it.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you don't mind that? It's not like you hear an arrangement once and it's ruined for you forever.

**Everest Witman**

No, it's the exact, the exact, exact opposite.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, maybe that's another way of taking the music that like we want familiarity, right? Like you go to the Gilmanton New Hampshire contra dance and they dance, Chorus Jig and they all sing along with it. You know, that's the same as the singing square or dancing to get Daft Punk "Get Lucky". You know, or knowing when Great Bear is about to do the crazy thing. Or whatever it is, you know?

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, totally. It's definitely the same thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So let's talk about medleys.

**Everest Witman**

Medleys, oh, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Tell me your thoughts about medleys.

**Everest Witman**

Do you mean contra dance medleys?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, in the context of contras or not, we could talk about anything you want. But.

**Everest Witman**

Um, so you mean like stringing dances together? Not tunes together, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, I'm sorry. I mean, tunes that you would play for one contra dance. I understand that.

**Everest Witman**

Because I have a very strong opinion about one of those subjects.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, tell me we got all day here.

**Everest Witman**

But before we talk about before we talk about tune medley dance medleys are something that dance organizers love, but people should know that dance musicians dislike because they're a lot of work. So if you really need to have your dance medley make it really short or switch bands halfway through, please.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, it's it's a lot of effort for a dance musician.

**Julie Vallimont**

And so this is a medley of dances strung together. I think it became popular at NEFFA. So you do the dance five or six times through, and then on to the for like, 20 minutes to 30 minutes usually. But I've seen ones that are an hour long, or an hour and 15 long. Even, you know,

**Everest Witman**

As someone who plays I mean, this is true for all instruments, but I play a very physical instrument, like my guitar, I mean, my arm is moving the entire time. And if I play for, I mean, 10 minutes is a long time to be doing that. But also 30 minutes is a very long time to be doing that, especially if I'm doing for progression that's like running for 30 minutes, and lifting weights at the same time for 30 minutes. And so it's bad for musicians from an injury standpoint to be playing for that long without stopping, and then also because you want to be changing tunes. For every time the dance changes ideally. You kind of throw out all your old tune medleys and arrangements from your carefully crafted arcs that you've scoped for a 10 minute dance. Because now you're trying to do the same thing for a bazillion different dances that don't have the same moves and the same places change all the time. So those are both things that make medleys challenging.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. They're fun for variety once in a while.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, I like I like a medley occasionally, if it's shared with another band, and we can switch off. Or if it like, you know, you have the opportunity to start really small and kind of string multiple tune medleys together and make a big arc. Crowfoot has a really awesome like suite of tunes, which is like 14 minutes long that they do on one of their albums. That type of really long arc starting with like some really sparse jigs and playing jigs for six minutes and then playing, you know, like four reels in a row afterwards is a great way that one could play music for dance medley. Except you stretch that over 30 minutes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Yeah, we haven't talked about Crowfoot a lot in this interview. They're a very groovy band.

**Everest Witman**

They're a very groovy band. Yeah, I am, yeah, I've definitely been influenced by them a lot. Adam, Adam Broome, who's the guitar player in Crowfoot also plays in DADGAD. But we're very, I was it'll be a somewhat different rhythm styles. But we also both play in a very percussive way. And Adam makes some great chord choices that I've kind of picked up on and started imitating. Yeah, I would say that Crowfoot's arrangements are as complex as Nightingales were, but in a different way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And now you can hear Adam and Jaige in their band Mavish.

**Everest Witman**

Yep, that's right. They're doing the same thing again, but with Matthew Olwell on flute.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Crowfoot was the one of the bands when I saw them I was like, oh, I want to do that. I think I was just dancing to them. They had this, like this way of I mean, it's a little corny, but as a dancer, I felt for the first time like, all the boundaries between everyone in the hall disappeared. And we were all dancing as like one organism. I felt, I felt like they're watching the dancers all the time and just locking in and like, the boundary between the band and the caller and the dancers all starts to disappear. It's so hokey to say out loud , but it was a really transformative experience for me.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah. It's kind of magic. Yeah. I find crowfoot music to be super mesmerizing in a different way than other band’s music because I think that with other bands I'm listening to the groove a lot. And Crowfoot somehow gets away with just totally mesmerizing you with playing amazing melodies in an amazing way. I mean, there's groove, but you're not you're not there being like, Oh, yeah, four five one yeah. Like you are when you're listening to a band like, Great Bear. You're like, holy crap. I'm totally entranced by this fiddle playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And they'll just take the concept and play it for 10 minutes.

**Everest Witman**

And it's just like super smooth and you just get lost in it. Yeah. Also the Mean Lids get away with that exact same type of thing. They're another band that I really like.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, they just take you it's like one groove experience per dance and then each dance is a mood and a feeling and you just go deeper and deeper and deeper.

**Everest Witman**

I find I find that dancing to the Mean Lids puts me in like, a flow dancing state more than dancing to any other band, because it's so, so trancy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, that that was one of my rationales for techno contra. It's like, I feel like contra dancing is inherently trancy. It can be it doesn't have to be, you know, but it can be if you play up that side of it. So do you think that would you ever play one tune for a whole dance totally.

**Everest Witman**

If I were to play one tune for a dance, it would need to have a really kind of intense arc to it to keep it interesting. And something that we do often is play something as a half half speed tune and then play it as a full time tune. And kind of go back and forth between the two. I don't think that playing a single tune the same way for an entire dance would would cut it for me. But if you could take the tune, and slowly build it for the entire dance, and maybe drop it back down at the end, that can be very satisfying, or do something really dramatic in the middle to change it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. What's your favorite arc to play for dance?

**Everest Witman**

For a one tune medley?

**Everest Witman**

I would say the thing that I'd reach to reach for most would be starting with something that's half time playing it that way for like three or four minutes, then moving to full time and building it up as a really exciting thing. So you start with that feeling like kind of a marchy trancy thing, and then you kind of let the beat drop and play it as a full time tune. You know what I mean?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yep. I do, that's very satisfying. Again, the dancers often think that something's coming but they don't know what. They wonder are we gonna stay this way the whole dance? Then they find out.

**Everest Witman**

That's a way you can make a one tune medley sound like a two tune medley even playing the same thing the whole time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, just kind of tweaks a little bit partway through. Do you find that you play the same way and in your different contra bands?

**Everest Witman**

Oh, it's totally different. I play I play a lot with Jesse Ball and Matt, Matt Kenney, and our dynamic is like, totally opposite.

**Julie Vallimont**

I can imagine. What instruments do you play?

**Everest Witman**

We play lots of instruments. I am, I'm mostly playing guitar and mandolin in that arrangement. But often we have Jesse playing piano and Matthew on drums, or Jesse playing guitar and me playing guitar at the same time. And so rhythm is already doubly covered once I've entered the picture. And I can kind of do whatever I want musically not have to support or carry the groove in the way that I have to do in Nova for example. So I, I like to play melody, or kind of reinforce the groove with complimentary stuff or play on top of it. Yeah, I can totally, I'm no longer bound to keeping my right hand going all the time. Keeping, keeping the rhythm going, which is very freeing in a certain way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah, that's a fun, like, I get to experience that in Buddy System. Because Noah is a very rhythmic fiddler. And he also does chops and feet. When he's holding down the rhythm, I can do other things.

**Everest Witman**

Yep, yeah Noah is a really unique person to play with, because he totally carries the rhythm all by himself. And I mean, in my experience playing with Noah I felt like he's been carrying everything and I'm just providing chords.

**Julie Vallimont**

How does that feel for you?

**Everest Witman**

Great. It's super easy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's, you know, like different fiddlers have different ways of playing and some fiddlers are very rhythmic and they have that rhythm and they're bowing and then some fiddlers are more melodic. That's just it like that's part of being a thoughtful accompanist right is to figure out what each fiddler needs. Or in your case with Jesse and Matthew, your lack of fiddler. Because that arrangement doesn't have a fiddler.

**Everest Witman**

It often does. So you'll often find us playing with various fiddle players at Pinewoods last summer, we had a slot during the day where it was just us three, which is actually a really fun experience because we were able to play guitar, guitar and drums for a contra session every day.

**Julie Vallimont**

Are tunes still relevant in that setting?

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, they are relevant. Although a lot of the time we just ditch tunes and play grooves. But it's it can be really fun to play, to play two guitars and drums because one person already I mean one person has has chords, one person has the melody. And you can you can drop out if you want and everything's still being carried.

**Julie Vallimont**

That sounds fun.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, it's really fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Just imagine you guys all dancing around each other. And then do you have any bands based in Quebec in Montreal, where you live?

**Everest Witman**

I play a bit with a comedy based contra trio called Groovatron.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wait, did you say comedy based?

**Everest Witman**

A little bit, it's a little bit comedy based.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's great.

**Everest Witman**

Um, so we we are a flute, oboe and guitar band.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sorry, I didn't mean to laugh. But you said comedy.

**Everest Witman**

And hotel bell is our most dominant instrument in the group.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a dominating instrument. Does anyone come when you're in the bell? Does anything happen when you ring the bell?

**Everest Witman**

I mean people get annoyed. It dings. Yeah, so we we play like the, like the Canadian contra dance circuit. So, Ottawa and the Montreal dance. Yeah, we just have a lot of fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Even though you're not there right now. You're here in Brattleboro.

**Everest Witman**

Not playing for contra dances because there's no contra dances at the moment.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Which is why you can walk over to my house. So what do you think, do you have, so let me put this in perspective. How many years have you been playing for dances?

**Everest Witman**

I think I played my first dance in 2014. So that makes six years at this point.

**Julie Vallimont**

Six years. And within that time, you've gone from learning to now playing dances all over the country.

**Everest Witman**

Yep.

**Julie Vallimont**

And how long have you been dancing?

**Everest Witman**

Since 2010? So that's about a decade.

**Julie Vallimont**

10 years. Yeah. But that's like, almost half your life.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. Yep. So so I'm, in terms of years I've spent in the contra dancing and being a contra dance musician. It's not a lot compared to a lot of people. But it's still the majority of my life. It's definitely defined all of my teenage and early adult years. Being being a contra dance musician.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And you have music in the family. Your mom Amanda sings and plays concertina and you have a sister who fiddles.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. I have two sisters. One fiddles, one plays the cello. I have a brother who plays the whistle. So we're we're all musical. I'm, I mean, Ellery my oldest sister, she's younger than me also plays for contra dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

She's a great fiddler.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, she's great. I went on tour with Ellery this fall with Jesse in the Midwest and we had a great time. And yeah, but I'm the I'm the Contra dance fanatic of the bunch.

**Julie Vallimont**

The one who does it the most. So, how have you seen the dance scene change in the time that you've been in it? And do you think it's changing now and where do you think it might go?

**Everest Witman**

Hmm. Well, there's been band changeover. A lot of the bands that I was listening to and was very excited about back when I started are no longer with us. Like Crowfoot, Nightingale, Great Bear.

**Julie Vallimont**

Nor'easter. Bands change, that's a thing.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah. So we have we have different bands. I feel like I feel like there's there's kind of a I mean, it's there's tons of there's like a handful of awesome, great bands out there. But kind of like the legendary or like the bands that I think of as legendary in my mind are often not playing anymore. So I think there's there's a big gap for new bands to to make a name for themselves right now. I don't think that a lot is changed for contra dancing itself. In that time we have we have this is, there has been a big movement to move towards gender neutral role terms in contra dancing. I'm not someone who cares to get very involved in that discussion, but I think it's a great discussion to have. So I'm not going to comment on it because it can be very charged. Otherwise, I think that's probably all that's changed. Techno contra dancing has become a thing in that time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's still kind of a thing, which sometimes amazes me.

**Everest Witman**

I think it's great. Yeah, and you've you've been a big part in making that popular which is really cool to see.

**Everest Witman**

Moving forward I don't I don't think that I have an evolution that I see, see coming. Maybe I might, I might imagine more balfolk couples dances making their way into the contra dance repertoire.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Everest Witman**

Nova has been trying really hard to encourage people to dance mazurkas and schottisches. Kind of in the place of a waltz at contra dances like where people might do a hambo. at the break, we'll go hey, we're gonna play a mazurka and you can mazurka to it or you can waltz if you don't want to mazurka then people who've been to our balfolk events or other balfolk events might be able to mazurka to our mazurkas or even go, okay, we're gonna do a schottische halfway to the break. And then we'll do a waltz for you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and I find that more and more people know them, which is what makes them fun.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, there's just been a really cool movement of contra dance bands, bringing in kind of the balfolk scene in the US like Eloise & Co. for example.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yep. That's Rachel Bell and Becky Tracy. Yep. And Rachel Bell and Susan Kevra have been playing together for a long time. And sometimes they play with Karen Axelrod and Susan spent time in France and they have gone over for balfolks and Andrew VanNorstrand and has spent time over there. And of course, the members of Nightingale, Keith and Becky, and Jeremiah. Like we talked about, and you know, I've done some, and there's lots of other folks and so it's fun now like Nova played at the Flurry last year and did balfolk.

**Everest Witman**

Yep, we were not on the bill as the classic contra dance band like we were two years ago. Yeah, we were the balfolk band. And we, because we have our audience base as contra dancers we convinced them all to come try balfolk.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's wonderful. And then we did the balfolk this year at the Flurry. It was myself and Anna Patton, and then had Andrew and Noah VanNorstrand join us.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. Awesome.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it is so wonderful to come in and the dancers are beginning to know what the dances are and in DC there's a resurgence of it there and you know, Jeremiah has been doing his Floating ridge music camps and having musicians from France come over for years. And so and there's a few other folks in the DC area who are building this scene up. And it's cool. And Jeremy Carter-Gordon also teaches dancing around New England and beyond. Sorry, I can't mention everyone. I'm gonna forget someone. So if I forgot you, you're still important.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. Tons of people. Yeah. Nova has really enjoyed working with Jeremy as a workshop leader for events. He's been a really, I mean, him and Susan Kevra, I think are kind of the leading faces of both teaching. Yeah, you're right now. And they're both doing an excellent job of bringing those dances to people who are primarily contra dancers.

**Julie Vallimont**

And just to play devil's advocate, is there anything weird about that? Like, is there anything weird about the fact that we're taking this music from another country for a different style of dancing and bringing it here for our own

**Everest Witman**

Well, If you've, I mean, I know for a fact that you've played for contra dancing in other countries. And you've probably noticed that it's not quite the same.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I love that.

**Everest Witman**

So, I don't know, I kind of wonder if Europeans coming over here come to a balfolk dance. Will, they go, “gross where these Americans doing?” They've totally butchered the bourrée. But I don't think there's anything problematic with it. Traditions change as they get spread. And it's kind of wonderful having more diversity in the type of type of dances that we do. And it's cool to see contra dancing spreading to countries besides the US.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's very popular in England, and there's a contra dance in Paris. And there's contra dancing in Denmark.

**Everest Witman**

And in Australia, too. I went to a contra dance in Australia.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, right?

**Everest Witman**

Earlier this year. Yeah. So it's, it's in a lot of places. And it's also a little bit different. I noticed in Australia, people were doing balance the waves with handshake holds, not like interlocking thumb holds. And those are, that's just like a mark of how that type of thing changes as it gets disseminated to another place.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, even like, when you do a pass-through, is it with hands or without even in different parts of the US. That's different. And so I think all of that is wonderful about a tradition that it settles in different places. To me, I think as long as we know what we're bringing in and don't lose our own tradition, you know, for example, if you go to the Scout House, dance, you always in Boston, you always do a hambo at the break. I think less and less so because it's hard for bands to play a hambo who don't have experience with that kind of music. It's a lot to ask of a band to play this entirely different style, but also do it exactly right and at the right tempo with the right feeling. It's like, we want you to speak English all night. But can you also speak some Spanish perfectly just for a minute?

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, well, I have, I have my one hambo that I play when, at a lot of dances someone comes up at the break and asked if we could play a hambo.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And again, someone can write to me and tell me the answer to this, but probably just explore it in a future episode so stay tuned. But why is the hambo a, quote, traditional thing in contra dance? And has it always been that way? And, you know, I know some things, but that's a different topic for a different time. And so someday people will be like, why do we do a schottische at the break? I don't know. We've just always done it. And there's this organic way that traditions just flow. People do what they're interested in and get inspired by things they run into.

**Everest Witman**

Yep. Yeah, I think it's a great process.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So maybe in 20 or 30 years, you see more of an international influence in contra music.

**Everest Witman**

Yeah, I think that's likely. Yeah, contra dance is different from balfolk because it's not a corpus of different dance styles from different places in the same way. But I think it's really so, but balfolk is lots of traditional dances from different regions of France and other countries in Europe. And I could see the occasional contra dance fitting into the balfolk tradition really easily just add another type of dance and people learn it. And then once in a while a band goes we're gonna do a contra dance, then everyone does it. But it's not like we're gonna replace contra dancing with with with like, the schottische or something. I think that those additions will always be kind of a side contra dancing like okay, we're doing, we do schottische at the break now. I doubt that that, that that would change that much.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, just, you know, a new thing, keep it interesting. Find something new to enjoy about it. I love mazurkas as waltzes and more and more people now know how to mazurka to them.

**Everest Witman**

It's very cool to see.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's very cool.

**Everest Witman**

A really fun thing that Kathleen and I experienced playing at the Edinburgh contra dance in Scotland was that we got asked to play a five time waltz at a contra dance that people knew how to do it. And now here some times people are, sometimes people are like you can you play a bourrée at the break? And lots of people can do it. That's very exciting to see.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah. So fun to talk to you about all these things. Are there any last things you'd like to touch on today?

**Everest Witman**

Nothing that I that comes to mind.

**Julie Vallimont**

We've covered several countries and half of your life. So you know, thats a lot. I look forward to hearing what you do next!

**Everest Witman**

I look forward to hearing the other interviews you're doing on this podcast because I don't think any are any are out yet?

**Julie Vallimont**

There's a couple out.

**Everest Witman**

Oh, really? Yeah. Okay. Well, I'll go listen to them then.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, the interesting thing is that they're just so different. You know, and I love like, I can ask the same questions to people and get very different answers depending on their perspective. But they're all right answers. That's the thing, is that contra dancing is many different things to many different people. And that's what makes this project fun is just the chance to explore all those different aspects. Some of which some people are drawn to and some of which other people are drawn to but all of which are valid. Yeah, thank you so much for your time today Everest I really appreciate it.

**Everest Witman**

Thanks so much for having me, Julie. It's been really fun.