Contra Pulse Episode 5 – Anna Patton

**Julie Vallimont**

Hi everyone. Welcome to Contra Pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This episode features clarinetist and singer Anna Patton. Anna grew up in a musical family in Northern Vermont and was immersed from a young age in an eclectic mix of jazz, classical, traditional, and world music. These days, she gets to incorporate many of those influences into playing clarinet for different kinds of dancing, including English, contra, swing, and blues. For the last decade, Anna’s innovative dance band, Elixir, has toured extensively around the US and abroad. She also plays clarinet with other groups like the Julian Gerstin Sextet, and the Dunham Shoe Factory, and she and I play for a couple dancing as a duo. Anna also loves to teach - she directs the Soubrette Jazz Choir in her hometown of Brattleboro, Vermont, which performs or creative arrangements of historical and contemporary American music. In our interview, we talk about Anna's New England influences such as David Kaynor, and how she got started playing for contra dances. And she shares her perspective on the interesting role of the clarinet as a contra dance instrument, and how to play tunes of different genres on the clarinet with each their own style and flair. We also reflect on life as a gigging concert musician, get into some nitty-gritty conversations about groove and beat placement, talk about her master's program at New England Conservatory, and think about what the future may look like for contra dance music

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello Anna, thank you so much for being here today.

**Anna Patton**

Hello Julie. Thank you for having me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Today we are on my porch in Brattleboro. It is a beautiful sunny day and we are practicing good social distancing during this interview, so Anna's wearing a wireless microphone and we are both wearing masks and hopefully that won't affect the sound quality too much. But safety first. Thank you for coming.

**Anna Patton**

Nice to be here.

**Julie Vallimont**

So this is the part where we talk about contra dance music.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah. I remember Contra dance music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Fondly. it's been a few months now. How did you get started playing for dances?

**Anna Patton**

I was an avid contra dancer and I was mostly a classical clarinet player. This is in my teens. And then I had gotten really interested in Balkan clarinet traditions. And I got my first experience playing for dancing that way. And it was, I had a few years of being quite obsessed with contra dancing just as a dancer and it not even occurring to me that I could ever play for contra dances. I think I was sort of focused on traditional musics that had particular instruments that were traditional to them and it just seemed like fiddle music. And then I remember hearing the Latter Day Lizards and hearing Bill Tomczak and having this sort of small lightbulb moment of clarinets can play this music too. And around that time, I also tried for the first time going to David Kaynor's Monday night tune session. And I think I'd always been really worried that people would hate to have the clarinet show up at anything like that. And they were just the opposite. Everybody was so friendly and totally pleased to have the clarinet as far as I could tell, as far as they said to me, and and then I also had some buddies who were into playing fiddle music, like Naomi Morse, Elvie Miller and we were in singing groups together. And I found that they also didn't mind me playing along on the fiddle tunes. So that was how I started.

**Julie Vallimont**

So how old were you when you first played for contra dance?

**Anna Patton**

For an actual dance on stage? I was probably 20.

**Anna Patton**

I think I was at Smith College at that point. Probably the very first one I did was an open band thing in Montague Mass. So not really a gig.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who was running that do you remember?

**Anna Patton**

David Kaynor Somewhere around there I went on the northern harmony tour this group based in central Vermont, a singing group. And we had a mini contra dance band within the choir. The choir was close to 20 people, and I think about five of us decided to form a contra dance band. And we had, I think we had two gigs. In the course of the tour. We had, we played for a contra dance in Fairfield, Iowa on a night when we weren't doing a concert, and I think we played one other dance. So those were some of my very early gigs. I played the Putney contra dance pretty early on. When I started hanging out in Brattleboro, Mary Lea, sort of took me under her wing and really taught me a lot of tunes and probably got me the Putney country dance gig. Sort of vouched for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, Mary has been very supportive of a lot of people.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah. Yeah, she was super helpful. And she's a great one to learn style from. She really cares about style and I'm glad that I had that chance to kind of learn to differentiate different fiddle styles. That's the quality I like in contra dance musicians, if they have some distinctive accents that they put on either New England tunes or Irish tunes or typical Québécois tunes or old time tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's a whole thing I want to talk with you about is playing fiddle tunes on the clarinet, and that whole experience. You know, for our listeners many people know Mary Lea from Bare Necessities in her English playing but she's also played for contras for many years, and in several bands and is less active playing contra dance now, but she, I used to see her play at the Scout House all the time, when I was dancing there, things like that. She's done it for a long time. So you started playing for contra dances. Now you travel all over the country to play for contra dances, ostensibly you still like it?

**Anna Patton**

I do.

**Julie Vallimont**

As a musician, what are the things that you enjoy about playing for contra dances specifically?

**Anna Patton**

Well, it can be quite exciting. If you're having an energetic night it can be pretty thrilling to have the hall sort of in sync and riding these these waves of energy together. I see bands that are not like social dance bands, that sort of jam bands that want everybody to dance and they have these gigs where they start out playing and they try to get the energy up and they look out there and like a few people start to dance.

**Anna Patton**

And they have this sort of extra goal, extra quest to get the hall dancing. And I sort of love that in contra dances, you don't have to, you don't have to convince the people to stand up and start dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Ideally.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah. So when you start from this baseline of pretty much everybody on their feet dancing, then you can sort of really get into sculpting a flow of an evening. And so it feels quite quite connected to an audience in a way that I think is special and that I enjoy connected to the dancers.

**Anna Patton**

And there's also just some lovely things about it as a type of musical work.

**Anna Patton**

Other types of touring musicians I see having to, like there are a lot of middlemen involved in touring a circuit of folk clubs or like in the singer songwriter kind of venues. Like probably you have a manager and then there's sort of a venue manager and and I'm sure there's some pluses to that too, like there's a lot of layers of professionalism in there and people who might sort of catch things that need to be organized that contra dances are sometimes doing slightly more scrappy versions of the logistics. Although really, there's a lot of top notch contra dance organizing teams these days. But it's kind of lovely to be more directly working for the people you're playing for. I appreciate that about touring the contra circuit.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. When I when I travel somewhere, I don't feel like I'm just hired for a gig. I feel like here's a community that I'm visiting. And I'm going to spend time with this community and get to know them. And they've welcomed me in. And that's a really cool feeling.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, definitely.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's also nice like, if you're a singer songwriter, you have to bring an audience. And if a community has hired you to play for their dance, theoretically, they already have a dance. If all goes well. And so it lets you focus more on the music side of things, and connecting with the dancers and less on all this overhead. Yeah, I mean, that's a whole other thing is that contra dancing is interesting as a folk tradition, because there's some dances that are very community based and the musicians are local and the people are local. And then there's some dances that are semi professional and you can sort of make a modest living, modest living, playing for contra dances. And it's it's become this kind of semi professional thing. I mean I think other traditions have had that as well like traveling dancing masters and things like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

But not everyone who plays for contra dances needs to do it full time, all over the country.

**Anna Patton**

Or would want to. It's a particular type of choice to make. Yeah, and I think it's, I think that it didn't used to be a job. I'd be curious what you uncover in your sort of historical or historical based interviews. I have a sense that being a traveling caller dance leader was probably more of a job going farther back and being a touring contra musician. probably quite rare. And I, my sense is that I sort of entered into the scene around when it was more solidly becoming a viable job.

**Anna Patton**

I do wonder if it will continue to become a an option of a full time job for people. I don't think it would be tragic if it didn't. Even though I have enjoyed the chance to do it full time for a stretch of years, or, you know, not quite full time because I always had some other fingers in some other pots but as the largest chunk of my income and activity.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you think that might change because of what we're experiencing now with COVID or just dancing trends or....

**Anna Patton**

Well, I think anything might change because of COVID. But I don't know what.

**Julie Vallimont**

None of us are experts on that. Who knows?

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, I think, I think dancing trends ebb and flow.

**Anna Patton**

And it's probably different dances are kind of headed in different directions geographically across the country. So I think there's been a real multiplying of dance weekends and in some places that looks sustainable, and then some of them are having a harder time filling. And I think there's also been a growth of numbers of bands that are trying to do it kind of professionally. And so I don't know really what to expect but it's interesting to, to watch and I do feel pretty fortunate that the part of my life that coincided with wanting to tour full time was also a pretty sweet spot in the evolution of especially larger events, dance weekends and festivals and things that were increasing in number and flying bands around and figuring out how to pay pretty well. And feeling excited about my band.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Your band mostly being Elixir. Yeah. Also the Figments, and you've had other contra bands over the years.

**Anna Patton**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

But these days your main band as I write, is that it's still Elixir, for the most part?

**Anna Patton**

I'd say so. I have been, members of Elixir have wanted to slow down for various reasons having to do with full time jobs and parenting. So I've been freelancing a little bit more in the past. You know three or four years.

**Anna Patton**

but not with any particular band that's sort of building a, building a reputation, just fun combos or as a guest.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you also play for English dancing.

**Anna Patton**

Right.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you occasionally play with me.

**Anna Patton**

Yes, I do.

**Julie Vallimont**

I consider myself very lucky. And so it's, you know, a lot of people who are conversant in one dance style become conversant in these other styles as you run into them. Like, for me, it was Pinewoods, where I first ran into all these other things besides contra dancing, or NEFFA, you know, or the Flurry. And then all of a sudden, you're like, oh, English is really fun. I want to do that. And Balfolk is really fun. And it's fun that you have, you have such a rich background of so many different kinds of things. So if you were going to describe your clarinet style for contra dances, how would you describe it?

**Anna Patton**

I do try to distinguish styles, maybe not as assiduously as I did 10 years ago. Especially I think because I work more with Elixir and we've gotten into a zone of distinguishing, like trying to have our different sets of tunes we play for contra dances, have some distinctive things about them. And sometimes that relates to a style like we're playing a Quebecois set and maybe beyond that we have an idea that we are inspired by La Bottine Souriante for this one or something.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that's with your horn arrangements and things like that?

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, horn arrangements.

**Anna Patton**

So,yeah, I guess on clarinet, I think about flute more when I'm playing Irish tunes. I don't have a lot of in depth study but I have taken a smattering of lessons or just learning tunes in this sort of detailed way from flute or whistle players. So I tried to play some of those ornaments and it translates somewhat alright onto the clarinet some of the time. And then when I play Québécois tunes, I think about melodeon. And I tried to use some melodeon instruments and make more of my trills into thirds instead of steps. Because the diatonic accordion has that trill available and not usually a stepwise trill I try to articulate more the notes with my tongue when I'm playing Québécois music. I don't have much of an old time clarinet style I think there I I kind of think about how Bill Tomczak for example plays on old time tunes. I think he has a pretty brilliant way of digging into them on clarinet but maybe even more so on sax. And for for newer example of a person on the scene, I think also Chris Miller, is an inspiration with a sort of American Southern flavor of digging into tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, Chris Miller now plays with the Faux Paws for contra dances has played with Great Bear for many years. And he also plays in the Revelers, a Cajun band. And I just think it's a fantastic idea. A Cajun band with a saxophone there. And he is good at bringing the hype and bringing the energy, yeah, just for context.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, so in southern tunes, I don't, I don't know what instrument I am. I am imitating and I feel like a little more of a hack if I am in a context where there are people who are deeply into old time music, but I also have a sense that there is this northern people playing old time music sound and I fall within that. It's almost its own thing. Love it or hate it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Yeah. There's an interesting question of authenticity and what that means in the contra world. Because there are some of us who fastidiously tried to play each style of tune to its own tradition. But yet we know that we're not doing that at the same time because we're also playing it in our northern folk melting pot contra dance tradition.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah. And the external rewards for doing that are few.

**Julie Vallimont**

(laughing)As in people don't notice when we try really hard?

**Anna Patton**

I think there's a little handful of dancers who, who are really fans of, say Irish music or something and notice if a contra dance band is getting into a very idiomatic sounding Irish groove, but I think that is a I think that's sort of low on the on the list of things contra dancers notice about contra dance music. And for me, I feel like it's still worth doing because it makes me more interested and I just like trying to make things distinctive. But it's not, it's not something we get a lot of pats on the back for.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Maybe other musicians, we notice what each other are doing and there's a fun like musical in references that we're making for each other. I try to follow the spirit of the tradition rather than the letter.

**Anna Patton**

And I do think in my mind, there's something that I think of as just contra dance genre.

**Anna Patton**

It's not really the right term for it because it kind of excludes a lot of other music that I definitely think is contra dance music in a sense, but I think of new tunes played in some particular ways with particular kinds of syncopation as sort of contra dance contemporary and to my mind that doesn't need comparing to Irish traditional music or something because it would just be so wrong. It would sound so wrong if that's what you said you're trying to do I think of it as its own genre.

**Julie Vallimont**

What do you think about New England tunes? And do you play them and what role do they have?

**Anna Patton**

Hmm, I Love New England tunes. Although the tunes I think of as New England tunes, probably not a whole lot of them are actually from New England. But tunes that I learned from very New-Englandy players. Like, like David Kaynor. I think of them as New England tunes, and some of them are probably from Ireland or Cape Breton.

**Julie Vallimont**

And of course, not all Irish tunes are from Ireland. You know, like tunes migrate from tradition to tradition. Anyway, I think we just do it a little more actively. What are some of the tunes you're thinking of when you're talking about New England tunes?

**Anna Patton**

I think sort of maritime-ish tunes like, hornpipies, Lamplighters, Saratoga, that's probably American, Saratoga. But then also, something like Rannie MacClellan's is really wedged in my mind as a New England tune. But it's a Cape Breton tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's not even that old.

**Anna Patton**

But it just was such a hit in the In the 90s, fiddle tune session world. And I think a lot of what sounds like New England music or not, to me depends on what the accompanists are doing. Like if I want to play a really New-Englandy tune set, I don't, to my ear, I don't feel like I have the power to make that happen just by the tunes I pick. And the way I play them. I feel like the rhythm section has to be on board and have that in their wheelhouse. A little bit of a boom chuck feel a certain kind of rhythmic relationship between the rhythm section and the melody players.

**Julie Vallimont**

How does that change the feel of the tune because I love when we played for occasional contra dances and you've asked me to play boom chuck piano under certain things, especially jigs that I'm like-do I have to? As much as I love it, it definitely changes the feel of the tune. And so for you as a melody player, how does that, why does that change things for you?

**Anna Patton**

I think that I like the way that I can..... Well, when I play with rhythm players who make a particular tune smoother than the way I feel it, I kind of make my own playing. I kind of make my own playing a little bouncier to get this sort of level of bounce that I want. Sometimes, sometimes, sometimes I want smooth all around and I can just settle into it but and then if the rhythm section is sort of taking responsibility for the bounce, sometimes I can play and in a way that I really enjoy that is a little smoother but with what I think of is lilt just to like, letting the sort of upbeat have an emphasis, but it's it's fairly light and kind of lifty. Rather than being at the [rhythm sounds] If the pianist or guitarist is, has a nice chuck with their boom.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's all about the chuck.

**Anna Patton**

Then I can ride on that in a way I enjoy. I like playing over other styles of the accompaniment too, but it's somewhat rare to find a player like you who is really willing to boom chuck and really knows how.

**Julie Vallimont**

Does it with relish? Yes, well, I think it's interesting like think listening to you talk I think boom chuck isn't just a style it's a state of mind. And I think it, I'm I'm discovering more as I played with more people over the years. It's a different philosophy of thinking about a tune and a different groove often, like the, and you talk about bounce or lilt, it's hard for us to use these words in a podcast that, talk about groove, it's fairly abstract but the amount of swing that you have in the notes and the amount of lift in your playing and that bouncy feeling. And I think that has changed a lot in modern contra dance music. If you listen to classic New England albums, like the New England Chestnuts albums or something, they're playing with a lot of swing, it's not straight in the same way. There's this definite lilt in this groove to it.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, I like to, I like a groove that allows me to play with some swing. And also I think I'm most happy a little bit in the back of the beat, if I have a rhythm player who doesn't mind being in the front.

**Julie Vallimont**

Owen Morrison is a great counterpart to you.

**Anna Patton**

Yes, although that didn't come immediately when we started playing together. He also plays a lot with his dad who's a very front-of-the beat player. So, there was a learning curve when Ethan, Ethan Hazard-Watkins, my spouse and fiddler, and I started playing with Owen figuring out how we were going to occupy the the time, occupy the groove.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think that's something that people don't realize is that what sounds like a perfect musical groove that's totally natural actually can take work and time and just playing together enough that you learn to work as one unit. Because when I hear the Figments or Elixir you guys are super tight. You know, but that takes, that takes time. I remember talking with Sabin from Tidal Wave about groove once. He kind of blew my mind. I don't want to give away his anecdote, but I'll tell it anyway. And anyone who's listening, go talk to Sabin about this and he can retell it in a much more nuanced way. But he basically, you know, I was talking with a Tidal Wave about groove and they're all very aware of like, where the bass is and where the piano is and who's on the front of the beat and who's on the back of the beat. And Sabin says that when he plays, his foot percussion is on the back of the beat, and his accordion is on the front of the beat.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, it's wild how far back Sabin's foot percussion is.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, all in one person in one body. And he's aware of this. And so the bass and the piano are at the back of the beat, really anchoring everything locking in with the feet, and then the fiddle and the accordian are pushing on the front of the beat. And it gives you this feeling that when I used to dance to Tidal Wave, they don't play down here as much as they used to. But when I used to dance to them, it was exhilarating. Because you, it felt like it was just this incredible drive, but I never felt frantic or rushed. And it took me years to figure out what that was until I asked the band why, how can you do this because I would clock their tempos afterwards. And they'd be playing it like 128. And it didn't feel too fast at all. And something it's about that like push pull of the groove in the pocket.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, I love, I love their grooves. It's not really the same as mine. I'm not good at getting that far out front of the beat. But I love it. I also get confused. If I play with someone who does foot percussion and puts it in that part of the groove. I have to really consciously push myself forward. I even play I play sets with Owen where, like a particular tune, where we've talked about it and I know he wants to melody further out front. And I just think about Owen's dad, Jim Morrison and I just make myself go there. And I think I can do it and never quite like settles into feeling natural but it's just sort of fun challenge to be to just decide that you're gonna step out to the front of the beat and hang out there for a whole tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, just I think you are often modest about your talents. But for those of us who are listening, like when you hear Anna play for a contra dance it is fierce. Like you really get out there with the fiddles and the way you and Ethan do unison melody. It's just amazing to me, the way you lock in together. It's so great.

**Anna Patton**

It's just a lot of years of doing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you have any like favorite moments like if you're gonna look back on the last 10 years of playing for dances, any moments on stage that really come to mind as your favorites? I didn't send in any questions in advance. This is very off the cuff so putting you on the spot a little bit. You could also come back to it if you want.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, it's all a blur.

**Anna Patton**

And I think, I think getting my mind thinking along the lines of these sort of, like, musical projects of tweaking grooves, like the the ways that that evolves are, are so subtle and are over so much time that it doesn't have me thinking about particular nights of dancing. I'd say a lot of standout nights of, of playing for dancing for me probably have to do with where I was. I got to go somewhere warm in the middle of the winter and all the windows were open. Maybe we were by the ocean.

**Anna Patton**

Or, or just occasion when I just felt like I had a lot of friends in the room and felt really connected to the group or something, sort of the standout things on that scale. I don't think I have particular evenings, though, to point to right now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. I mean, you do workshops sometimes and you teach contra musicians. And when you're teaching contra musicians, what are your favorite things to talk about with them?

**Anna Patton**

I've really been enjoying teaching a workshop that I usually call deliver the rhythm, which is sort of a funny workshop for a clarinet player to teach in a way because I don't get the greatest degree of control over the rhythm in my ensembles, compared to the say, guitarists or keyboard players or even fiddlers. There's something about what you can do with a bow on strings that I think is inherently just a little bit more easily rhythmic than clarinet.

**Julie Vallimont**

Probably just a motor thing, right? Like the way you bow a fiddle or strum a guitar. The clarinet doesn't, I used to play saxophone, it doesn't have that built in motor rhythm.

**Anna Patton**

Yep. I sometimes try to, I sometimes gravitate towards things I can do with my fingers that, that do have a kind of rhythmic, almost kind of slapping feel to them. Like articulating a note an instant before I slap the fingers down for it. Or kind of, I think of it as wanting to figure out how to have more teeth in my playing to play with more teeth. And I don't mean the teeth inside my mouth. Sort of [biting sound] Yeah, grit, sort of grit, that sort of biting, slapping quality Yeah, but maybe playing a not inherently very rhythmic instrument is has made me more analytical about what it takes to be part of a kind of music where rhythm is really the key element above all else. And so I like, I like talking about that in workshops and I have some sort of exercises I get people to do to try to introduce people to more to a way of thinking about it more explicitly if they haven't before. And I do talk about things about like front of the beat, back of the beat groove and, and dragging or speeding up tendencies, which I think are often pretty related. I like to say, I like to say sort of go into it with a curious mind and assuming it's nobody's fault, assuming that it is a sort of thing about where people feel comfortable in the beat and a mismatch of some kind if you're dragging or speeding up, and you know, sometimes it really turns out to be somebody's fault, but I think sometimes it's not and it stresses musicians out when there are speeding up or dragging problems. And I think just approaching, approaching it with more sort of curiosity and a little bit of analysis can can be helpful. And then I sometimes teach improvisation in contra dance music. And I improvise quite a bit when I'm playing for contra dances. Although I'm not I'm not a big fan of the, now the clarinet is taking a solo model. I do occasionally turn to my band and give them the signal that tells them that now the clarinet is taking the solo. But what I really find the most interesting is sort of entire ensemble improvisation and improvisation is almost the wrong word. It's also you could call it arranging on the fly. Just being being super responsive to each other in the moment, and a combination of individual musicians making sort of bold rhythmic choices and everybody else really catching on to what they did. Nobody taking up so much space that it maybe becomes a solo per se. I'm really interested in that dynamic in ensembles.

**Julie Vallimont**

That to me is one of my most favorite things about playing for contra dances. Is that mode. You know, the tune gives you enough that you have a common framework. And then the question is, what do you do with it? And I love watching, like watching you in the Figments, where it's you and Ethan and Owen, it's a smaller group and you seem to do more of those things. You don't have all the set arrangements that Elixir does. And so it's more it's a, it's fun that you can have different personalities and different bands. And I love watching you all just listen to each other and shape things and how far behind do you leave the tune?

**Anna Patton**

If I leave the tune behind.I try to be doing something That is quite clear, like essentially having made up a new tune. And I'm probably slightly more conservative than I used to be in a way. I think I'm a better improviser than I used to be but also, but also less prone to kind of love it for its own sake.

**Anna Patton**

I like making phases when I'm improvising. I do a lot of taking it out for a few bars and then quoting the tune, or even just the shape of the tune, like maybe I don't go back to the tune for a couple bars, but maybe I play something that's very recognizably the shape of the the turnaround from the tune that I was on

**Anna Patton**

Sometimes there's a chord progression. underlying the tune that feels like it's enough on its own. And then maybe I would do something a little bit more like trying to join the rhythm section. And just groove on the chord progression if I feel like that's all the dancers need to stay oriented. But I tend to really try to keep it in mind. Whether I think I'm providing enough for the dancers to stay oriented in time.

**Julie Vallimont**

So if you are improvising and you as a band end up taking out the tune, does it come back eventually?

**Anna Patton**

Usually.

**Anna Patton**

In Elixir, often we'll have a somewhat composed ending where the tune is probably kind of in but maybe we are trading it between a few different voices or maybe maybe it's there but it's pretty thoroughly drawn out because we have some very loud instruments. But usually at least in spirit, we're back on the tune at the end of piece. Yeah, I think that, I think that the tune returning is generally the most exciting thing that can happen at the end and a lot of the time you want an exciting ending.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you feel like you've gone somewhere and then you come home. Yeah, maybe slightly different for the journey. But you come home.

**Anna Patton**

In the, in sets where we're maybe ending, ending in a gentle way. It's a little more likely that we might not have to tune in at the end. Might end on a groove.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you studied at, you got your masters at NEC [New England Conservatory]. And you went to the, is it, I always forget is it in temporary...

**Anna Patton**

Contemporary improvisation program.

**Julie Vallimont**

I said in temporary comprovisation. That's a spoonerism for you. It used to be called the third string program and I always forget the next step. But I think Eden McAdams-Somer and Jeremiah McLane and Jacqueline Schwab perhaps?

**Anna Patton**

Yes, in the old days Jacqueline Schwab, Lissa Schneckenburger did her undergrad there. Eden McAdams-Somer is the I think she's the assistant chair of the department now so she's still still there. Other others in the in the dance scene as well. Rachel Panitch was there with me. She's a wonderful fiddler from Rhode Island who lives in Boston. Marnen who's hyphenated last name I'm not going to remember right now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Laibow-Koser?

**Anna Patton**

Yes. Plays for contras and I think other.....

**Julie Vallimont**

English, all sorts of other things. He's a multitalented person as are all of you. How did playing, how did your experience at NEC, I don't want to say change your contra playing because I don't want to assume that it had to. But what happened to your contra playing when you went to grad school?

**Anna Patton**

I think that would be an interesting question to ask the members of Elixir.

**Julie Vallimont**

(laughing)I'll make sure, I'll interview all of them separately.

**Anna Patton**

Especially during, while I was in the program, they would give each other these looks that I know meant, like, Anna's gotten weird. But, I mean, I think there were, I think there were non weird effects too. I was playing clarinet such a lot that just playing that much my sort of physical relationship with the instrument just got more seamless than it had been and I think my expressive range got larger, which is really perhaps the main goal of the contemporary improvisation program's pedagogy. I would venture to say there's a lot of goals, but they pretty much try to get everybody to explore a larger expressive range, than what they're doing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that, like the variety of sounds you make on the clarinet, or an emotional range or volume range, or all of those things?

**Anna Patton**

I think all of those things.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, it's hard to have a large dynamic range on a sort of micro level at a contra dance. And the hall is usually somewhat noisy, there usually needs to be some degree of sort of volume compression on everything to make it come through. But I do try. like, I feel like as a band, you can have a dynamic range in the course of the set. Yeah, I think I started using more techniques like the kind of growl that reed players can do that snuck into my playing more, some other sort of extended technique, gimmick things. And then on the other hand, being in that program, in some ways really made me appreciate things that I got from the contra dance music worlds that weren't so much a part of that program. There's not a whole lot of groove based playing or at least there wasn't during my years and the particular path that I followed through that graduate program. And so I felt very glad to also have contra dance music at the same time as a way to keep pursuing my curiosity about groove and rhythm.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I imagine your playing settled, like, I know, like having been around you a little bit during grad school, you could experiment and you try all these things. I mean, I think that's what contra music is great for is experimenting and trying new things. And you have to fail a little bit. You have to be like, oh, that didn't work. Okay, the dancers didn't get that, or that transition was bad. Exactly or oops, I just made the rhythm player lose her place in the tune or whatever. But that's part of the process. Right? And so I imagine you went through a period of experimentation and then kind of settled into something.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah. And I think that I have always been conscious of trying to do that when the dance crowd is very advanced. Because good contra dancers have very good recovery skills. I'd say that's maybe the main thing that makes somebody a good contra dancer in my mind is that they can get lost for some reason and then find their, find their place later in line. So yeah, I think I tried to save my most outrageous experiments for those sorts of groups.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm just laughing at Elixir imagining their faces while you're trying your outrageous experiments.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, not so outrageous.

**Julie Vallimont**

No, they're not.

**Anna Patton**

Just noises they hadn't heard before perhaps.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think those things are good because you know, in any band you can get, you get used to what your band is. And it's fun to shake that up a little bit. But it can be surprising at first when you're not, when you've gotten comfortable with what's familiar and then it's not familiar anymore.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah. And the good thing about expanding one's expressive range is that if there are things that you've been feeling that you haven't been able to express, sometimes you can start to express them more. Sometimes when I'm in a dance and things are exciting, and the dancers are, like looking great and stomping, and I can sort of feel the energy. You know, dancers will give like a whoop or a holler or something, and sometimes I sort of want to do that, musically. And it's nice to actually feel like I know how.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. What are your favorite ways to do that?

**Anna Patton**

Oh, you know, on clarinet some kind of high wail or some kind of like [musical sound] up to some high note or, or a growl or some kind of fast, repeated riff that maybe like starts a little quieter and then gets sort of edgy and even slightly distorted and things like that. There's, there's moments for that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely. Especially if you have other people who are sort of holding down the fort musically. You know, you you probably inhabit a fun musical role but maybe not always fun but the musical role where you're the kind of middle swing person where sometimes you're rhythm section, sometimes you're texture, sometimes you're melody. You know, where it's a little less defined. The the variety person.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, I like I like that role. I think they have a sort of second fiddle-ish personality. And then also, wildcard and some gigs I get to be both.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, second fiddle meaning you're a second fiddle like you're also playing the melody.

**Anna Patton**

I'm a second fiddle but I'm also the second fiddle like, second fiddle in that you're maybe more likely to be on a harmony here, maybe more likely to be playing a little lower than the fiddle. I think there are personality types to some extent.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Anna Patton**

When I have sometimes played contras with Andrew VanNorstrand on fiddle, we are both kind of second fiddle personalities. And so we have these kind of fun, but also quite odd, I think sort of chasing each other around into both wanting to be in the second fiddle role.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's fun. I think not all not all the contra dances have gotten to hear Andrew as a fiddler because they mostly see him or have seen him as the director of Great Bear where he's calling shots. I mean, they all do it and Noah helps lead the band too but especially Andrew with his electric guitar, you imagine him as the band leader and it's fun to hear him in this different personality as a fiddler.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, he's a lovely fiddler. And he also kind of learned his tunes from a lot of the same people as me in the 90s. So it's it's nice to find those people and discover this common repertoire even if I wasn't playing with those particular people way back then.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who are some of those people?

**Anna Patton**

Well, I've done some gigs with Aaron Marcus and Aaron seems to know a bunch of the tunes. I think people who went to Ashokan before I ever discovered ashokan fiddle camp, Northern Week.

**Julie Vallimont**

This is Jay Unger and Molly Mason's camp.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah. I think that the repertoire that was getting taught at Ashokan really had a lot of overlap with what I was learning around Southern Vermont and Western Mass.

**Julie Vallimont**

David Kaynor, has been a fixture at Ashokan for many years.

**Anna Patton**

That might be the main reason that there's that overlap. And Mary Lea being at Northern week and teaching a lot of people around here. And Rodney Miller also I don't know if he worked at Ashokan but he did a bunch of teaching when he lived out east and I used to sometimes play with Elvie Miller and Namoi Morse and people who got a lot of repertoire from him.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes. So when you meet you have this common musical vocabulary. Even if you don't know it. It's like, it's like growing up in the same region and you speak with a certain kind of accent or something. Or have a certain vocabulary. It's cool. I remember when I started playing with Noah VanNorstrand I understood his fiddle style so much more after the first year I went to Ashokan. And the way it's like that kind of Catskills vibe and there's some swingy-ness to it. And some jazz-ness improv, but then also the different kinds of fiddle styles. All blended together from all the different teachers in that whole melting pot. You know. So I think a lot about like, what is the tradition of New England contra music these days? And, you know, it seems to me I want to hear your thoughts about this, but it seems to me like, like we, most bands these days don't play traditional New England tunes most of the time. And so there's several different traditions, there's a tradition of New England fiddle tunes played in a way that we feel is traditional. Maybe we define that by Bob McQuillen or Dudley Laufman in the Canterbury Dance Orchestra or the New England Chestnuts albums, or whatever. You know, although Rodney played on the New England Chestnuts albums, and has since gone off and done other things, stylistically. But then the modern tradition, like if when I was a new musician coming to learn, I was like, oh, this is what we do we play tunes from Ireland and Québec and Appalachia. And, you know, like, if you look at the Portland collections, is that our tradition right now, is all these tunes from all over the place all put together. Do you have thoughts about that?

**Anna Patton**

Well, I wonder how in touch I am in a way, when you do more dance weekends and fewer local dances there's a certain group of bands you hear over and over. And I know that there's a lot of bands that I haven't gotten to hear or haven't gotten to hear much. I think there are some younger bands that sound kind of surprisingly like the 90s to me.

**Anna Patton**

You know, you never know if sort of a tradition or aesthetic even is going to sort of spiral and get, you know farther from its origins or, or a circle. And I guess a spiral is the kind of a circle, spiral and a tight spiral where it keeps coming back.

**Anna Patton**

I feel really lucky that the world of contra dance music seems to really value creativity. I think there's a lot of music scenes that don't as much and so I like that people are trying all sorts of things and that the definition of contra dance music, or New England contra dance music is is a bit, a bit up for grabs, a bit vague.

**Anna Patton**

But at the same time I'm a little bit of a, I don't know if I'm a traditionalist, but I have some attachments. I have an attachment to boom chuck playing. I don't want to see it disappear.

**Julie Vallimont**

Me too, that's why I started this project.

**Anna Patton**

I have an attachment to fiddle tunes. There's not so much what I'm hearing at the moment. But there have been some years in the last decade when I sort of wondered if fiddle tunes were a little bit falling, falling by the wayside in contra dance music. There are bands that don't play them very often and a lot of people really love those bands. And a lot of them are really good bands. But yeah, I have a I have an attachment to the real fiddle tunes even Elixir has sets where what we're doing doesn't quite count as a fiddle tune. And if we play a couple of those in a row Owen will be like, let's play some fiddle tunes now. And I agree that's sort of where my aesthetic is too. Like I'm glad contra dance music can be can be something that sounds really contemporary. And then after I've done that for a set or two, I, I really want to bring it back and kind of boom chuck and really pump out a good tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you notice a difference on the dance floor?

**Anna Patton**

I think so. Since I play all over, it's hard to separate differences from geographic differences because there are pretty significant geographic differences in dance styles. But yeah, if you if you play in a halftime groove like if it sounds like you're in four four where the boom chuck that's not there would be like [short rhytmic sounds] and you're like [longer rhytmic sounds] - something like that. And I think people probably gravitate towards being like keeping their center of gravity a little lower, being a little less on the balls of their feet, maybe a little bit more side to side motion. Or maybe really all I mean by that is that's what my body feels like doing when I'm dancing to those groups. And I like both. I think it's probably healthy for everybody's bodies that in the course of an evening contra dance music sounds different enough from itself that we feel like moving in some different ways. I like, I like an evening of dancing where I feel like I've sort of danced differently at different points.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I think that's what modern callers expect as well, like they're trying to craft an evening like that. And so they'll have very specific requests for the band that are all very stylistically different from each other.

**Anna Patton**

Right. Although I also have this sort of stubborn, like a lot of my favorite contra dance bands play fairly in genre and play fiddle tunes pretty much all the time. Like Tidal Wave.

**Julie Vallimont**

In genre, meaning they have a thing, they have Québec music.

**Anna Patton**

And they're pretty immersed in it.

**Julie Vallimont**

And they do it all night with subtlety and variety but within that tradition.

**Anna Patton**

And with newly written tunes, like a lot of creativity. Also, but yeah, I do have a stubborn feeling that I don't want the expectations to evolve such that a band that plays say Irish music pretty much all night or Québécois music all night isn't doing it right. I want there to be room for bands that are specialized to that degree.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or god forbid New England tunes all night. I mean, like, what if you're a band who just doesn't want to play slinky jigs? I'm raising my hand.

**Anna Patton**

I don't think you should have to.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right? I mean, like, is that the new traditional where every night must contain one slinky jig and one driving thing? And one groovy set and what, you know.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, I don't think so. But there are places that bands might not get hired if you don't play any slinky jigs.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And there's some dancers who will be disappointed if there aren't any slinky jigs. And that's okay with me.

**Anna Patton**

I expect so. Vote with your feet everybody, there's a lot of dances out there.

**Julie Vallimont**

The caller will turn to me and say slinky and I'm like how's mysterious? I can give you mysterious. Like that's a realm that I will go to but that's the fun thing, right? And then I do hope that I mean, it's interesting that that they asked a lot of us and by they I guess I mean, the community is we've set it up, callers and dancers and the whole thing. Like, you have to be able to play tunes from all these different styles and play slinky and sexy and play upbeat and driving and play beautiful and delicate and play a hambo at the break, which is an entirely different tradition of music. That's a lot. And I think, you know, there are some bands who play for contra dances like, this is an old time band that pays for contra dances, or Québec or Irish bands. And I hope that there's always a place for them. Or someday a New England band that plays New England tunes for contra dances.

**Anna Patton**

Yep.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's, it's funny that we've come so far that that would almost seem revolutionary.

**Anna Patton**

A niche thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Which is kind of funny.

**Anna Patton**

You know, there are, there are circular patterns in the evolution of music, and it might be someday everybody will be boom chucking.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, it'll be glorious.

**Anna Patton**

Have you heard this new cool thing?

**Julie Vallimont**

(laughing) We have to sell it as a new hip thing. Oh, it's so funny. But I mean, I think the thing I love about contra dance is that it's very much a living tradition. Like it checks all the boxes. You know, there's being new tunes written within it all the time. And the interesting thing is most of them, like Bob McQuillen was infamous for writing so many tunes. And most of them were in this kind of quintessential New England style. Most of the new tunes being written are not in that style. There are people who do write in that style and it does happen. So you know, there's a shift, but also things settle in weird ways. And I feel like as long as we keep in mind what the roots of the tradition are and don't lose track of them. If everybody started playing pop riffs all the time and stopped playing fiddle tunes. I would be sad.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, well, some people would be sad. And those people would start playing fiddle tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hopefully.

**Anna Patton**

I think people will, will keep finding colleagues with whom they can make the sounds they want to make for contra dances and probably somebody out there will like dancing to them. And really like more than more than thinking about whether people will forget the roots of the New England tradition or something. I just feel so fortunate to be in this world of events that pretty much feel that they have to have live music. And I hope that that will continue. That's a really remarkable thing, people who want to go dancing a lot of people every week, some people want to go dancing twice a week and they want to do this particular kind of dancing and they feel that live music is a totally essential component. I think that's really special. And just really hope that continues at the most basic level. And then within that, I hope boom chuck also is a thread that continues. But in a lot of the world, people dance to a lot of recorded music, and it's pretty great to be in a world where people want to dance to live music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It's what allows it to be a living tradition. And that connection, just between the caller and the musicians and the dancers is amazing.

**Anna Patton**

Yeah, it's very generative. Yeah, so I guess the the reasons contra dance music evolves are so linked to a really wonderful thing about it for me that even if I don't like all the evolutions I feel very aware that the amount of creativity that goes into it is, is because it is this strong tradition that really makes music quite central. And it wouldn't have to like contra dancing could exist without caring so much about the music. So I just feel very lucky about that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, we'll see what happens. Well, is there anything else that you would like to touch on today while we're talking?

**Anna Patton**

Well, I bet that people you're interviewing these days are talking about COVID. And I, there's a lot to say there but I guess one thing I wonder is if there will be a period where dancing becomes more regional again, both because of the nature of travel and possibly also because people will feel safer at events that are more local. And I think that could be really interesting and not necessarily bad. Like I really value a nationwide and even beyond nationwide community and I want to be able to see those people and be in touch but it would be interesting if the people who live around here started playing their local dances more. I mean, some of us do, but my band is scattered, so I don't get to play the local dances very much. It would be fun to get to play the local dances more. And I wonder if that's a thing that might emerge before, some theoretical time when we all go back to flying around the country to dance and play.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I think there's a different kind of diversity that happens when you have a lot of different communities, each with their own character and needs and desires. You know, in big cities, some dancers want one thing and small towns, dancers want another thing within different dances in the same city, like in Boston, for example, where I lived for many years, you know, there's these different dances on Monday night at the Scout house and the Thursday night and the BIDA dance and they all have different niches. And you know, I love traveling to communities that don't have a lot of visiting traveling bands. Yeah, it's like, there's a lot of different reasons to want to go to a contra dance. And there's a lot of different things people want out of a dance. And on the nationwide circuit, a lot of dancers want to go dance to their favorite bands, the way you choose a concert of an artist that you really like. And so they'll go to a weekend if there's one artist, but not if it's a different artist, like, oh, this band isn't my favorite. I might not go. Oh, but this lineup is really great I'm going to fly across the country to go to it. That's totally valid. But then there's this way of just saying, well, this is my community. I show up every week or every month. It doesn't matter who's playing. Because I go there to see my friends and colleagues and I know the music is going to be good enough, you know. And they're just two different philosophies.

**Anna Patton**

All different, yeah. Yeah, and some people do both. Some people are very loyal to their local dance and a few times a year they fly somewhere to some destination contra dance event, that feeds them in another way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And I love that we have full time nationwide dance musicians because it really helps spark innovation. in a lot of ways, I think there's some things that you can only do when you devote yourself to it full time, just the sheer number of hours that we have spent on stage. You know, like, I think boredom is a big driver of creativity. And just the sheer number of hours. And also the network that happens, like often, my favorite thing is hanging out with the other band at a dance weekend. And playing tunes late at night, or just talking and hearing what other bands are doing. And so you have this music that can happen at a high level and all the bands can create a sound that's very different from each other.

**Anna Patton**

And so many musicians are, are really thoughtful about what they're doing in some way, but not always in the same way as me and I love sort of uncovering the ways, different bands get analytical together. You know, like you and I talk about front of the beat, beat back of the beat playing, and we have sort of a shared language for that. And that might be really unfamiliar to some other musicians, but they may have some really, highly developed vocabulary for talking about something we haven't thought to find words for.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then I also think that the tradition would suffer if all you had were these bands flying all over the country, the same 15 bands, and there's no local community You need both. And I think it's unfortunate that a lot of nationwide bands seem to shy away from playing common tunes, or things that have already been done. Because at its extreme, it can make you feel like you have to be different. And so no one sounds really traditional, because you all want to sound different from each other. And so having a local dance where there's a sit in night, and there's the same repertoire tunes that everybody knows is such a wonderful thing. Like that's why sit in bands and pickup bands work is because you can have this common repertoire tunes. So I just hope that they both have important roles. Yeah. Let's see what COVID, this is only the second interview I've done since COVID. So we actually haven't talked about it very much yet. So, yeah, you're the first person that really broached. I think it's an opportunity for us to be intentional about our communities. And what we want to do with them and and how we can keep this going as a tradition. Well, thank you so much for your time.

**Anna Patton**

Thank you.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's wonderful to hear your thoughts.

**Anna Patton**

It was a pleasure talking to you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes. See you on the dance floor.

**Anna Patton**

Oh, I hope so.

**Julie Vallimont**

Someday.

**Anna Patton**

Someday.

END

Thanks to Ellen Royalty for help in preparing this transcript.