Contra Pulse Episode 6: Arthur Davis

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello, and welcome to Contra Pulse. This is Julie Vallimont Today we speak with Arthur Davis. Arthur has been involved in the contra dance scene since an early age and has been actively playing for dances as a piano player since he was a teenager. He also plays banjo, trumpet, button accordion, and concertina with, in his words, varying degrees of competence. Arthur has played with the bands Gallimaufry, Cloud 10 and Hidden Drive with Andy Davis and Laurie Indenbaum as well as playing with whoever happens to show up to play tunes. In other parts of his life he has spent a number of years working on tall ships with students of all ages, integrating music and singing into the life of a working sailing vessel. He currently lives in Brattleboro, Vermont where he runs a community-scale urine recycling program. Arthur and I had a lovely chat on a beautiful summer night on my porch. We talked about his early roots, building communities through dance, and glorious New England tunes. And as piano players, we also had a real piano player geek-out session. We talked about piano styles, the difference between acoustic pianos and keyboards, and the fact that many dance halls don't have real pianos anymore and what that means. As always, we're wearing masks, so apologies if it sounds a little muffled. The music you're hearing is a home recording of three classic tunes that Arthur recently made with his father, Andy Davis, on accordion. Hope you enjoy the interview.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hi.

**Arthur Davis**

Well, hey, it's good to see you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Arthur Davis. Welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Arthur Davis**

Thank you. Thank you. It's great to be here on your porch.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, my porch is a new hotspot, but one at a time.

**Arthur Davis**

Not that kind of hotspot.

**Julie Vallimont**

It is a wireless hotspot. Yeah, so we're just here to chat about contra dancing. I found in the last couple of interviews, it takes us a few minutes to warm up because we have to remember, like, what this thing is.

**Arthur Davis**

Well, I was thinking about that today as I was thinking about coming this evening. But I was just trying to remember the experience of being at a contra dance, which has seems like it was a long time ago. And like things that have been on my mind in the past about contra dancing and contra dance music that I just haven't thought about in a long time. So we'll see, we'll see how, how the memory goes.

**Julie Vallimont**

What we found so far is that it's like riding a bicycle. You forget and you're a little wobbly first and then. Oh, right. We remember this. You have probably been playing for contras for a very long time, like most of your life, right?

**Arthur Davis**

I have. So my my first memory of playing contra music was my dad had a kids contra dance band. Oh, it was through the Brattleboro Music Center. I think there might have been might have not been, I think it wasn't actually, I think it was just just a thing that my dad did. I'm not sure, to be honest. But, we met at the Oak Grove School right down the road. And we, I played recorder mostly in the band.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. How old were you, playing recorder?

**Arthur Davis**

Second or third grade I think is when this maybe started. And we had like we practiced for like, you know, the fall and then we'd have, we'd play at one of my dad's family dances up in Dummerston and then we also we also had a kitchen junket at our house. So like all of the families would come and we'd like move all the furniture and have a little dance, and all the kids would play. It was very fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

And just for context for our listeners, your father happens to be Andy Davis, well known pianist and accordionist. He's been in the Brattleboro scene for a long time.

**Arthur Davis**

It's true, yeah. Since sometime in the in the 80s, I guess.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you grew up having these kitchen junkets and playing recorder. That is so much fun.

**Arthur Davis**

It was very fun. So then I started playing piano, I started taking the classical piano lessons at some point, also in elementary school, and then I started, I learned most most of the contra dance piano that I at least learned from that from the beginning stages of that part of my piano playing from my from my dad. And I would say that he's probably the biggest influence on my playing, but that has definitely evolved over the years. He was maybe the first influence on my playing, and and it's evolved since then, but I would say that I'm still I'm still trying to achieve many of the aspects of his playing that I like that I can't do.

**Julie Vallimont**

The lifelong quest.

**Arthur Davis**

Oh yeah. For sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

What is his playing style based in and how does that compare to yours?

**Arthur Davis**

Well, one of the things that he does that I really enjoy that I just that I have never quite quite mastered is a lot of inside lines. So kind of like, I mean, I think he thinks about things. He studied a lot of Baroque music when he was younger and he's talked to me sometimes about how that influenced his, like the way that he thinks about like chords and like going from one, you know, you know, thing to the next. And especially how the chords relate to the melody. And I think that he's definitely more so than many players today. I think he really tries to tailor the chords, make the chord choices that he's making have a direct link to the melody, which is, you know, not necessarily a good choice or a bad choice. But it's definitely I think, a lot of times these days, I think that a lot of people play a chord progression, kind of for the sake of the chord progression. It seems like that happens more. I've heard that more recently.

**Julie Vallimont**

The tune becomes a foil that you can put your cool chords over.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. Exactly, and I think that my earliest influence was definitely kind of the opposite direction of like, tailoring the chords to the melody and if the melody, you know, is playing this arpeggio then that's kind of the chord that that he would use but so I think he uses a lot of inside, I call them inside lines. See if I can try to describe what that means. I think of it as a lot of like thirds and sixths. That kind of, you know, weave in chromatic ways and uses a lot of chromatic leading lines from one thing to the next often, a lot of circle of fifths kinds of things.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you're gesturing with your thumbs as you do that. Does that have its origins in Quebec piano playing?

**Arthur Davis**

Yeah. I think a big part of a lot of Quebec piano playing that I've heard. And I think he he definitely also had a lot of influence from from folks that he met up there.

**Julie Vallimont**

And so where does that lead you to your style now? I mean, we can jump all around from your early days to now, we just skipped your whole life. We'll get back to the middle later. [laughing]

**Arthur Davis**

when I think about like, my role as a piano player in playing for contra dances, I kind of I think of myself primarily as, as the rhythm section. I think, one lesson that I kind of got from from my early days of playing contra dance piano was that, you know that whatever choices you make, in terms of the notes, that's less important than keeping the rhythm going and being being a stable place where, you know, the people who are on the dance floor moving around can, you know, they have a steady foundation of beat to walk around to. I think that in contrast to a lot of piano playing and also piano playing that I do, depending on the context. I find my piano playing changes a lot when I'm playing with someone else who is also filling that role of of kind of like the main rhythm. Like if I'm playing with a guitar player or something like that, and I enjoy, I enjoy that. But I think what I really love doing is getting to be that person who's kind of in the rhythmic driver's seat. And I think it it brings out a different kind of playing that I don't know, I'm hesitant to say I enjoy it more, but it's something that feels that feels very, I don't know, special in a different kind of way in terms of in terms of the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

You certainly have the most freedom if you're the only rhythm player chordally and rhythmically and you don't have to coordinate with anybody else.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. I think I enjoy not having to coordinate on such an intense level all the time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because it's not only do you not have to coordinate with someone else, but I also feel like you don't have to coordinate with yourself. Like your brain doesn't have to know what it's going to do before you do it. Your hands and your subconscious can have their own whim.

**Arthur Davis**

They just kind of move. You may experience that too. It's very weird because I do things that I'm like, I have no idea why I did that. Where did that come from?

**Julie Vallimont**

How many times have I told myself that? Why did I do that? I don't know.

**Arthur Davis**

Where does it come from? Like, have I ever done that before?

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, I guess that's what they call inspiration, right? it's about as close as we get to it.

**Arthur Davis**

Feels like a fairly mundane inspiration, but I suppose inspiration all the same. I think that when it really comes down to it, I really, I just really love listening to tunes. And, you know, I'm someone who has dabbled in melody instruments for, you know, different melody instruments for my whole life

**Julie Vallimont**

Besides the recorder.

**Arthur Davis**

Besides the recorder. And, you know, right now I'm semi working on on playing the concertina, which is quite fun. I've never really achieved proficiency enough on a melody instrument, where I can, you know, just have like a vast swath of tunes that I can just like play for dances. And but one thing that I really have enjoyed about, I mean, about playing the piano for contra dancing for so many years is that I just know, like, I can sing all of these tunes. I know them all in my head. I can't necessarily play them on a melody instrument but I can I can sing them all.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean you play banjo and accordion and some other things. But there's a certain facility that you need at a contra dance. I mean, when we were together at Pinewoods that year, when we were in the band with Ethan Hazzard-Watkins, we had some great morning banjo for those morning dances.

**Arthur Davis**

That was very fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's great. But yeah, it's it's like it's sort of like that joke, that saying if a tree falls in the woods and no one hears it doesn't make a sound. It's like if a piano player knows the tune but can't play it is it still a tune? Like, I feel like we rhythm players have all these tunes, like I must know, I don't know, hundreds of tunes. I don't even know how many I know, I don't keep a tune list like melody players do. But they're in there, how do you get them out? It's funny.

**Arthur Davis**

You know, I think another just an interesting thing that I've that I've come across. Like as a backup accompaniment player, I think often I've been in situations where, you know, people are really, if I'm playing with a melody player who I haven't played with before, sometimes folks that are really wanting to like, rehearse and make sure that we know the same tunes, and I often more so enjoy just going and you know, learning you know, figuring out what tunes we know in common in the moment and figuring out, getting the opportunity to kind of learn them on the fly. And I don't know, I think that was that was the thing that was uncomfortable for me for many years, but was something that part of the like, kind of, you know, the rhythm section, you can, you know, make the number one job is being the rhythm section and, and taking a few times to, you know, figure it out on the fly. I definitely, I feel like it's a skill that you get better at over time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like when someone's playing a tune that you don't know and all of a sudden you have to put chords behind it. Often you have to play potatoes and you don't know what's coming next. The one chord is usually a good starting point but it's not always a good place to end even.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. So that's always those are those are fun, fun moments.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it is a skill to listen to a tune as it goes by, an unfamiliar tune, and to try to get its essence quickly chordally, to put a rough structure in place and then fill it in as.....

**Arthur Davis**

Over time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, exactly. How do you think like, when did that skill come together for you?

**Arthur Davis**

I think it was. I mean I'm trying to remember. I feel like there was a point in my life I was I was playing a lot with my dad and Laurie Indenbaum, who is a fiddler who lives up in Athens, Vermont. And I think it was, it was kind of something where we, you know, we were playing, playing a bunch, quite a lot together. And you know, we, we play a lot of the same tunes, but then we would kind of play new, we'd throw in some new tunes every time. And I think it was kind of a gradual process of getting more comfortable with that. I think it was also something that my dad encouraged me to work on because I was kind of afraid of doing that. And I you know, wanted to do the right thing, but kind of getting used to, getting more comfortable with like, just kind of, not necessarily doing it the correct way the first time but....

**Julie Vallimont**

Meaning the chords matching the tune correctly? 'Cause you've also got dancers to think about, as well.

**Arthur Davis**

You know, I think also a big part of my playing from, you know, in terms of where the kinds of dances that I played for a lot when I was learning to play were more community dances rather than like, you know, the contra dance circuit kind of dances. And so I think a lot of both as a musician and as a kind of just person in the contra dance community, I think that has definitely shaped my, a lot of things about how I think about social dancing. But in terms of the music,you know, the idea that, like, you know, we're kind of there to, you know, help facilitate them having a good time together. And, you know, being being very steady is kind of number one, number one job. And then everything else kind of can come after, can flow, flow from that.

**Julie Vallimont**

So rhythmically steady, and probably chordally steady? Whatever that means. Do you tend to be predictable, like the way, will you chord a tune in the same way a lot of times in a row or is it kind of different every time through?

**Arthur Davis**

I would say it's similar, but I think that when I'm like playing a tune a lot of times in a row, often I make different, I'm often making the same chord choices a lot of times in a row, but making different kind of ways of approaching it both in terms of like, either dynamics or in terms of, you know, choppy or more smooth or, or the way that I'm getting from one chord to the next chord.

**Julie Vallimont**

Walk ups, walk downs. That kind of chromatic thing you're talking about.

**Arthur Davis**

I like, I'm a very big fan of the chromatic things in general.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, I love your piano playing. It's got this wonderful, like old school charm to it. That I think, I don't know, maybe that comes across the wrong way, but it's great.

**Arthur Davis**

Well, I appreciate that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like, it's like whimsical and clearly a spur of the moment sometimes, which is really fun, because I don't always know what you're gonna do.

**Arthur Davis**

I don't either.

**Julie Vallimont**

But then it's got that that older sound where it should, what is tradition? I'm trying to avoid using the word tradition to define anything. But using things to define the word tradition instead. But it's got a different sound that we don't always hear in a modern way.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. I mean, I think when I think of a lot of .....

**Julie Vallimont**

Classic maybe?

**Arthur Davis**

Sure, right. Like 30 -40 years old?

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. [laughing] Well, that's the thing like what is tradition, right and when are you talking about?

**Arthur Davis**

Right. I mean, I think a lot of like a lot of piano playing that I hear for dances these days, often I feel like piano is used in contra dancing these days, not exclusively, but very often as along with another rhythm instrument, as I was mentioning earlier, and I think that it can become in those situations much more of a kind of color intermediary kind of instrument in the mix, which is really neat. I don't necessarily think that I'm super good at that. But I, you know, maybe I haven't practiced it as much.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, for years you played in the band, Gallimaufry.

**Arthur Davis**

Yeah, I was kind of forced into doing that kind of stuff sometimes. [laughs]

**Julie Vallimont**

And that's with Ness on drums.

**Arthur Davis**

And sometimes Donal on guitar or Alex on guitar or cello.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yep. And someone on foot percussion.

**Arthur Davis**

We were always all bunched up in each other's space. We were also in college. I don't know what that says but we were like, we were excited to be playing together.

**Arthur Davis**

You know, sometimes our instrumentation would kind of like, we would get in each other's way for sure. You know, that was the challenge that, you know, I think that we, we got better at over the years. But it was definitely not always a smooth experience. People say, like, you know, I need more space. Like sometimes, we all you know, just playing with four other people. There's a lot of a lot of noise happening.

**Julie Vallimont**

Four different brains, four different sets of whims... I mean, we could talk for a whole hour about just the dynamics of that, which would be really fun. You know, like, there's a lot of I think people who don't make music and maybe dance to contra music don't maybe aren't always aware of what goes into making a band and how bands make decisions or whether they make decisions about how they're going to play what they play. And usually, you either have to have arrangements that you play, have systems that you've worked out in advance for how to decide how to carve out space for each other. Get a mind meld after playing together for a long time, if you're lucky or not care.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. Yeah, and I think we were, we had some things that we did, where we kind of like really like planned out certain sections of things for like, this is what we're going to do like, you know, the last bunch of times or something, but in general, I think we mostly, we were largely unplanned. We, at a certain point, we were like, we should do more planning. But a lot of a lot of things were fairly unplanned, but we tried to set up systems as you were saying. To try to work on this one, you know, Donal's gonna, like, kind of take it for a while on the cello. And then, you know, I'm gonna maybe sit back for a while.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. taking turns driving, as I call it. And then you can kind of follow each other. Some people yell chords. I'm not a chord yeller.

**Arthur Davis**

Me neither.

**Julie Vallimont**

I can't say it before I do it. I don't know what my hands are going to do. Yeah, that's interesting. I mean, do you think that how you would do that would depend, like, do you play differently depending on the audience that you're playing for, like a community dance versus a big concert dance?

**Arthur Davis**

Oh, probably. I don't know. I mean, I think I played differently depending on who I'm playing with, too, and like, what, what kinds of tunes we're playing.I mean, like, I think I play differently if I'm playing say with you know, with Laurie and my dad, we play a lot of tunes that are, you know, much more kind of New England and Quebec tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Laurie has a wonderful repertoire of New England tunes.

**Arthur Davis**

I... her repertoire, you know, for all of the people who I play with, I have to say, I love her fiddle repertoire, just about in terms of like tunes that I that I find myself singing or like, I can just like sing all the tunes and repertoire. I love those tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Can you name a couple examples off the top of your head?

**Arthur Davis**

Like Bouchard's horn pipe St. Lawrence jig and Swinging on a Gate and Now I can't remember the name of this one, no I can't think of it. The thing about being a piano player. I think I play differently for those, like, if it's like, you know, just like melody players playing those kinds of tunes, and I think I play much more maybe what you would call a kind of like, I don't know, classic or contra dance piano. Like, people say boom chuck kind of piano. Which is definitely my kind of my bread and butter kind of stuff. But I think if I'm playing with, you know, with I think often more with like, when people have a real like repertoire of a lot of really smooth kinds of tunes. I do other things which you know, to kind of try to not make my piano playing so like kind of chunky and bouncy along with like really smooth Irish tunes or something like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

What piano styles or inspirations do you draw on?

**Arthur Davis**

For those? Yeah. Oh man.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you just make it up sort of?

**Arthur Davis**

I think I just made up stuff that seems to work and it's evolved from there.

**Julie Vallimont**

How do your hands move differently?

**Arthur Davis**

More things at the same. like hands at the same time. As opposed to back and forth between my left and my right hand and probably more sustain like sustain pedal and more like just like holding. Like sustained both with the pedal and with my hands.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a kind of droney or blockier sound.

**Arthur Davis**

But I you know I also am trying to balance at the same time with with, you know, trying to keep a rhythm, a rhythm going for the dancers to......

**Julie Vallimont**

You can't get too droney or else you lose that rhythm.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. And I you know, I kind of think that that's like a that's a pretty intrinsic thing for me is like is playing that role.

**Julie Vallimont**

We were talking about like your dad's repertoire and Laurie's repertoire. Where does most of your dad's repertoire come from? And is that yours? Or is that is your repertoire different now?

**Arthur Davis**

Well, as you were saying earlier, it's funny as an accompanist, because like what is my repertoire? In some ways, my repertoire is whatever the person's repertoires who I'm playing with.

**Julie Vallimont**

Where's your happy place?

**Arthur Davis**

Right. I think like the things that I come back to again and again are like, the kind of like New England and Quebec and like kind of maritime like Cape Breton kind of tunes.

**Arthur Davis**

I don't know to me like, I think people have all kinds of adjectives to describe stuff. So I don't really know the right adjectives to describe to describe them, but like, I think there are, like, a lot more major tunes. And in general, I like playing major tunes. I like backing up major tunes. I think better. I think I feel more free in terms of like chordal choices. Sometimes if I playing lots of minor tunes, then it feels like I'm kind of just playing two chords. And other chords are just feel kind of like too novelty. If you overuse them, it feels like too much of a novelty. Whereas, like when it's like major tunes that are based on like a circle of fifths kind of thing. I feel very free in terms of like, what, what I can do and like how to move around the piano. And I think that there are plenty of people who I love how they accompany minor tunes, and it's like, super awesome. But it's definitely my happy place so to speak, tends to be in that but I think also a lot of those tunes I would consider like very melody driven tunes where the melody is like clearly driving the chords, as opposed to the other way around.

**Arthur Davis**

Which, I really like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I do, too. I love that.

**Arthur Davis**

Dynamic.

**Julie Vallimont**

And we were talking about, like, how to choose chords, especially in a band situation. But these New England tunes, a lot of these classic tunes, they tell you what chords go with the tune. They're just the chords; you don't have to think about it.

**Arthur Davis**

You don't have to think about it and in some ways, like I often just in life, music aside, I often feel this way that I'm more creative when I have constraints.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Arthur Davis**

And sometimes when I'm, like, given a blank, totally blank slate of like, I could do anything in any situation in life. I don't quite know where to start. But if there's a limit of the scope somehow, which could be like the melody is telling you that like, basically the chords to play, then I feel a lot more free in terms of what I can do within that constraint.

**Julie Vallimont**

Limitations are freedom, look at Haiku or bluegrass or contra piano playing.

**Arthur Davis**

You know, I like going to, I really like going to restaurants that have a very limited menu. You know, 'cause then I feel like I'm not overwhelmed by the potential choices. And I feel as satisfied, if not more satisfied, usually.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or even like, when you go to those restaurants more often in Europe where they just have a menu and you walk in and that's what they're serving today. And it's a multi-course thing. Tonight, here's what it is. That's a good New England tune. Right?

**Arthur Davis**

Right. Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like it's, here's the one here's the four, here's the five, here's the one. In the B part you might get a five of five, but it has to be the five of five because no other chord will work there.

**Arthur Davis**

Right, because that there's that one note, it's gonna be nothing else.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, I like I played for contra dances, for a few years before I started teaching piano, you know as one should. And I remember the first year I was at Maine fiddle camp. And one night they, I was on staff teaching piano and they asked me to play for Dudley's for the evening dance under the tent. And there's like, it's an open band. There's like 30 people on stage and Corey DiMario was playing bass. Corey's great and I didn't know him that well. And it's funny how deep the training is of like, I found myself sitting there thinking are my chords cool enough? And then I turned to Corey, I was so naive, you know, I turned to Corey, and I said, Do you want me to do chord subs or anything? And he's like, why? Like, he just looked at me, like, totally calm. And he's like, why? And I was like, do you get bored playing? And he's like, no, I love it. Like, you just play the tune and you don't worry about what the chords are. And I mean, this was years ago for me now. But I think sometimes as rhythm players, we get used to thinking we have to do cool things. And they're not always the things. [sounds of neighbor talking to her dog outside] Sorry, everybody, you can definitely tell the passing seasons by the sounds that are on these interviews for sure. A couple of months ago, it was mating birds. And now it is lawn sprinklers and other people's conversations through their open windows and dogs who are out for walks. So funny. In the fall, it'll be the crinkling of leaves.. In winter, it'll be our soft tears in the snow

**Arthur Davis**

And our chattering teeth because we're still out on the porch.

**Julie Vallimont**

Anyway, I just I felt like Corey was so accomplished. And I was so grateful to him for just saying, why do we have to change the chords? You play the chords the same way every time and then when you switch tunes then you play different chords. What a gift that was.

**Arthur Davis**

Yeah, totally. I also find it's like in those moments, those are the moments when I really can just, I'm just totally in the tune and in the feel and it's just like, it's totally kickin.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And then you can focus on the groove of the tune. When we're thinking about chords, then it means we're busy not thinking about other things. Or if we're thinking at all, you know, and so that was, so I love these New England tunes, that they just have a way they go, and why do you have to dress them up? You know, you can but you don't have to. So, do you have any like defining moments as a dance musician of like moments that you just thought were really cool either as a dancer or on a stage that you remember?

**Arthur Davis**

I don't really remember where this was or, or really when it was, which maybe defeats the purpose of a memory as you were asking me to do. But I kind of remember the feeling of like when I was like first playing for contra dances on the piano and the feeling of like, being the one person, you know, accompanying the tune, you know, and, and kind of experiencing it from that perspective. And just it was very, like, very satisfying experience as a as a young person. To kind of, I don't know, feel like as you were saying, kind of in the driver's seat of the whole kind of experience the laying the foundation for you know what, what is kind of happening sonically. And so I remember that feeling of just like really deep satisfaction of kind of getting to be in that role. So that's something that I continue to feel. But let's see, any specific moments. I have a lot of memories of just being in different interesting places, and the kinds of of dances and communities that were kind of, that were that were out dancing. One is at Castleton what used to be Castleton State College, and it's now Castleton University in Vermont. And it was a gig that my dad often had at the Governor's Institute of Vermont. The arts program up there. And for many years I went up just as a little kid playing, not playing in the band, but just going up and tagging along. But it was just like this big field and like all high school kids in this big field, you know, on a summer night, not unlike tonight. You know, many of whom had never contra danced before. And, you know, but it was kind of that was kind of the function or the means that they were using to build community. And it wasn't, you know, wasn't necessarily... they weren't contra dancing in order to, you know, do lots of cool contra dance moves, or even to do cool dances with cool choreography. It was really like the function was to build community. Among these, people who were, you know, getting together for a, you know, basically a kind of a summer arts camp. And that really sticks with me as a way to think about social dancing and contra dancing is as you know a way to build community amongst people and it doesn't always have to be the most complicated dances or even executed particularly well. to like really, you know, be one of many ways to build trust and kind of have fun amongst humans. Another event that we often did that I often played for was up at the Dummerston Grange in Dummerston Vermont and it was for the Putney School summer program, you know a bunch of high school kids who are kind of at a summer camp but that one was amazing because you know we'd get there early to play and and we'd set up the sound system and we you know, do our soundcheck and then we'd just wait. And we knew that like they were going to come sometime within like, around seven or something. I don't know what time it was, but like they would almost never get there right at seven but then at a certain, like so we just be sitting there waiting. Then it was like just the three of us up on stage. What I often did with Laurie and my dad and and then all of a sudden the school bus would pull outside and in the span of about 15 seconds the hall went from like just the three of us totally empty hall to like full of crazy high school kids and like then it was like, off the walls. And then it was like, immediately, you know, we'd be into like, you know, playing and like, you know, all these kids who had, you know, again, many of them had never done anything like this before. And it was like super high energy for like, you know, an hour and a half and then the leader of the camp actually, Tom Howe, who is Steve Howe's brother, of CDSS. Tom would be like, alright, we're like, we're done, back to the buses and then also in a span of about 15 seconds, the place would just empty and then it would be back to the three of us just sitting up there in silence.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sort of what just happened?

**Arthur Davis**

What just happened? Was that a dream like, I'm not quite sure what happened I think I just woke up. Very funny. Those were very, very exciting dances but then you know also I have like, on the kind of more of the, my travels, like playing for the contra dance circuit so to speak. You know, I remember one really great memory is the contra dance up in Belfast Maine and I think you know on the same note it was like just one of this moment of really almost for the first time like really seeing a like wedding of like the kind of the evening contra dance world and the community dance world in like such an amazingly like together way is, the way they integrate those those pieces up there is just so special. I've held that held that in my heart for all the years since I since I first played up there.

**Julie Vallimont**

And have you played there with Cloud 10 or Gallimaufry?

**Arthur Davis**

I think I think with Cloud 10, it's really fun because they have this big open band for the for the, like, kind of family community dance beforehand. And so, like, I'd like to go down and bring my trumpet or something, like kind of toot along.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I didn't even mention the trumpet before when we're talking about instruments.

**Arthur Davis**

That's a whole 'nother thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a whole other thing.

**Arthur Davis**

It's a whole 'nother thing that's kind of funky to figure out how to play for contra dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's just a hard instrument. It's not really set up for fiddle tunes, but you make it work.

**Arthur Davis**

I always like to play, this is a good trivia if anyone knows this tune who's listening to the podcast, Mountain Ranger.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love that tune.

**Arthur Davis**

It's like one of the only tunes, like old tunes in B flat. Like there's not a lot of like, I mean, there's not a lot of tunes in B flat in general, but......

**Julie Vallimont**

And you know what the people of Belfast in that scene would love the tune Mountain Ranger. I learned it from Benjamin Foss who loves to collect old New England tunes. And he now lives in Belfast. And that community's got a little magic to it. They love the old fashioned tunes up there. And I love playing them up there, Mountain Ranger is a great tune.

**Arthur Davis**

But that's like one of the only, there was a time when I was like, I should learn to play a bunch of reels on the trumpet. I don't know why I thought that but I learned that one. It's the only one that I can like really like it was a funny choice because it's really notey. But I was like, well it's in B flat, so of course I should learn this one, it'd be really easy.

**Julie Vallimont**

You should do a medley, Mountain Ranger into President Garfield's Hornpipe. Call it the death by trumpet medley.

**Arthur Davis**

It's a mouthful to play that by yourself though. It's like the only melody instrument. I've did that a couple of times and it's very difficult.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well maybe you have to do what they do with bombards and Brittany and like tile yourself

**Arthur Davis**

Right so you play two A's and then like call it quits for a few times through. I definitely, I've employed that strategy before. Usually when I know that I have like ample backup of other melody players.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, like don't leave me alone too long.

**Arthur Davis**

Come back in or just stop playing and then they kind of figure out, oh, Arthur stopped I gotta come back in.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, I love the Belfast dance. I mean, I think that, to me is a great example of a good combination between that community spirit and contra dancing. You know, it's like, a dance where people know how to contra dance. But you don't have to know how to contra dance to be welcome.

**Arthur Davis**

And I strive for that, that feeling in, you know, in wherever I am dancing or playing for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you think that different kinds of music lend themselves differently to creating that atmosphere?

**Arthur Davis**

Oh, that's an interesting question. I don't know. I mean, I think I probably have a very subjective answer to that. So I just preface everything I'm gonna say by saying that people could probably have a very valid disagrement with me and that's great. But I think, I don't know, there's something to me there is something about like having the music be like very happy sounding as opposed to kind of like intense. That, I think, at least having that kind of music, at least, you know, come back again and again throughout the evening that does like really just bring that kind of atmosphere or like foster, at least help foster that kind of atmosphere. But yeah, I don't know. That's an interesting question. I haven't given that specific question a lot of thought. I'm just, I'm just hypothesizing out of my mouth. What do you think?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, that's something I'm been mulling over. You know, there's a relationship between the bands and the dancers. And like, sometimes I feel like as musicians, we play what the dancers want. But sometimes the dancers respond to what we're playing and they dance differently. I just noticed passively, people at NEFFA dance differently to like the NEFFA Festival Orchestra than they do to some of the other bands like the mood seems different in the room. And at NEFFA because it's a festival it could be that some people only come for the Festival Orchestra not for the other things. So are they dancing differently? Or is it different people in the hall, but it seems to attract a different vibe, or maybe because it's the end of the festival and it's like, look, we all finished it! We're all here together. We're all exhausted. I think dancing exhausted can be really great. Like I love Sundays at the end of a dance weekend. Everyone's like left the outside world behind and their body's been broken down and they're doing their last bit of energy.

**Arthur Davis**

Yeah, it often feels like, right, just the high percentage of joy in the like percentage of feelings.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. That exhausted communal joy feeling. And, but I think, I don't know, I think there's something this is I don't want to talk too long because this is your interview. But again, this is all highly subjective. That's the magic of this format is that I can ask everybody the same question everyone answers differently and all their answers are right, because we all have different experiences within this tradition and we all see different corners of the tradition.

**Arthur Davis**

Definitely.

**Julie Vallimont**

But I kind of think that some tunes ask a lot of you as a dancer, or the way we play tunes it like demands a lot of the dancers, and other tunes are just this happy groove. And just like they don't ask us to think of cool chords to put under them. They don't ask the dancers to do fancy moves.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. I think one one example I think about is that often you know what just as an example because I was thinking about it like at say at this at those, you know, high school camp dances up in Dummerston, where, you know, the all the kids would would come in and what would we do first but we'd play a tune, like no, you know, no calling just like everyone's coming in the hall all at the same time. We're just gonna play and we, you know, I don't know we play something like like the March of St. Timothy or something. I feel like the the mood of that tune is just like, unfiltered kind of lightheartedness. And I don't know, I think that, I don't necessarily think that every every tune needs to be that way. But I think that those kinds of tunes in that kind of vibe really does like foster like, we're here to be with each other and in kind of a big sense.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that matters.

**Arthur Davis**

Yeah. So that, yeah, I love that feeling. I kind of get, I definitely get lost in that, in that mood. In those moments, which is a very, a very natural high. Do you, does your family play a lot of Bob McQuillen tunes? Some for sure. Laurie plays a bunch of Bob McQuillen tunes Laurie has done or did a lot of work with Bob in terms of publishing quite a number of publications of his tunes, I believe, and she plays a number of Bob McQuillen tunes. I also I do have a memory, a very distinct memory of being very little and walking into the Peterborough Town Hall. And as a quite little person and hearing Bob play the piano and it was definitely a force of nature, you know, you know, there was no doubt of who was driving the bus. You know, I definitely I there are moments when I tried to channel that as best I can.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, he had a very unique ...A very like, downward play style and playing like a lot of it. Yeah, you could sink into it with your feet like, Yeah, he had a very unique, a very like, downward play style of playing like... you could sink into it with your feet like. Totally. Very sturdy, very sturdy, sturdy playing.

**Arthur Davis**

Which, you know, I think, you know, when I think about contra dancing, like all traditions has evolved a ton, which is like both net is like inevitable and also necessary. And it's interesting to see how it evolves differently in different places. And as someone who has like continued, who lives in a place where it has, you know, been around for a long time.

**Arthur Davis**

When I go to some of the like, dances that have been around for a long time. There's definitely a kind of a, I don't know. I don't quite have this quite what I'm saying. But there is like a sturdiness to like dancing in it. I don't know, if it's just an older, an older style. But fits with that with that style of playing for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And we've kind of tangentially touched on this in some of these interviews, but we haven't explored a lot is playing with the sound system versus without a sound system and how that affects the way you play. Have you done gigs without a sound system?

**Arthur Davis**

Yeah, yeah. I also, I love playing for gigs where the piano is just not quite in tune. You know, as a piano player, because in those situations, if you don't have a sound system, it means you're playing a real piano, and almost all cases, I suppose, and you're kind of at the mercy of whatever the the instrument or instrument shaped objects that's, that's there. And but it's it is it well, not necessarily always like the most sonically satisfying in the kind of tune fullness way. There's, there's another piece of that that's like, kind of that is also kind of satisfying, but I love but I do like playing that in that way. Where I don't know in some ways it's it's like you, we were talking about earlier with constraints. By having constraints of like, you now, there's even more constraint where you have to you have to play so that everyone can hear you. It's like kind of up to you to do that. It kind of frees you from some of the other things that you might feel like you have to do. And as a dancer I feel like also when I've been in those situations, it frees you from, like, wanting to wanting to hear lots of different things because there's just kind of an excitement of here we are there's like nothing. You know, it's just it's just the sound that's being produced and us listening to it and responding to it. It's, I don't know if you've had gigs where the power has gone out party way through?

**Julie Vallimont**

Some of my favorite gigs ever. It's magical every time.

**Arthur Davis**

I remember one time we were Gallimaufry was playing so luckily with Gallimaufry, there's five of us so we can produce a lot of sound. But we were playing at Glen Echo.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a big hall.

**Arthur Davis**

The power went out and there's it's so cavernous in there. And we all like sat on the edge of the stage, you know, and you know, Donal had the cello, that we like put up the lid on the piano, and just tried to play so that everyone could hear us. And it's, you know, a lot of a lot of things that maybe we worked on as a band kind of went out the window in those moments. But it's still an experience that we all remember way more vividly than, you know, many gigs that didn't have that happen.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's magical you really get a sense that you're all in this together. And it really changes the playing style. You know, even like playing on a, even with a sound system, I find that I would play very different on acoustic piano versus a keyboard. Just like that in tuneness it has, and that plasticness of the sound. There's just no substitute for like a slightly wet tuned piano.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. It just feels very real.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like when I first started learning piano, I took Mary Cay Brass' piano course at Pinewoods. And she's talking how she often puts seconds in her chords like close seconds, just because she wants a chord to have a little bit of crunch to it. And I find myself wanting that gritty feeling in a keyboard that you can't get

**Arthur Davis**

In an electric keyboard?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah on an electric keyboard because, you know, it's always in perfect tune. And you want to play pretty things or delicate things or textures or subtle things, but when there's no sound system or if you're playing an ancient out of tune piano where all the action is different on every key and some of the notes don't work. It's not about subtlety.

**Arthur Davis**

I wonder if they make they could make a keyboard that has those qualities?

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh my god, I have wanted that!

**Arthur Davis**

That would be so funny, or if there could be different settings for different kinds of out of tuneness.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, like ragtime saloon out of tuneness versus, you know, contra dance piano out of tuneness.

**Arthur Davis**

Sitting in the Grange hall for 30 years out of tuneness?

**Julie Vallimont**

Or then there's like these there are a few beautiful pianos like the one on the stage at Glen Echo. That's a concert grand that's tuned regularly.

**Arthur Davis**

That thing is amazing.

**Julie Vallimont**

And so there's a wide variety of pianos. It's an interesting job that we have as pianists that other people don't, where you often don't end up playing your own instrument, and you have to adapt to whatever's there. I remember I played the Gilmanton dance in New Hampshire. And I hope I'm not conflating these stories, but after a while, it doesn't matter if it's accurate, because it's just part of the lore.

**Arthur Davis**

Part of your experience. Yeah, somewhere in the past at someplace.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was playing their piano and it was not in great tune. You know, they did a good job maintaining it, but how much budget do you have to tune your piano or do you care is the other thing, but I remember them saying something like there's a hole in the floor in front of the piano so don't put your foot through the floorboards. And I don't remember if I had the story exactly right. But I just found all that so charming. It was so wonderfully charming, or the piano on stage at the Scout House for many, many years, maintained by you know, Kate Barnes and Debbie Knight and Jack O'Connor and all those folks and they had the rearview mirror on it. So that you could see the dancers behind you.

**Arthur Davis**

Yeah so good. Another another boon sometimes for playing the piano. I mean, it kind of is a double edged sword because in these days of keyboards, we're either you know, lugging a lot of equipment and heavy keyboards around or we don't have to bring anything. I have this one memory of playing for this dance with Randy Miller over in New Hampshire. And I got lost on the way to the gig. I thought I knew where I was going, and I took a wrong turn. And anyway, it was a little bit of an adventure getting there. But I finally ended up getting there like, when when it was supposed to start or maybe even like three minutes after when it was supposed to start. But, so I like walked in and I sat down and we basically started playing. You know, it was like it was it was in that instance it was just amazing to be like, alright, I missed, like we need to start right now and I can just sit down and play Don't have to tune. There's nothing I can do. We may have to tune but that's not gonna happen.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right exactly. For a while I used to carry around the tuning wrench with me, a piano tuning wrench, just to fix unisons since they were out of tune with each other just a little bit with permission.

**Arthur Davis**

That's awesome.

**Julie Vallimont**

But I think that's something that's changing. I think there are fewer and fewer pianos in the dance world. You know, like a lot of times halls are deciding to get rid of them or at the Concord Scout House, a lot of piano players don't even use the piano that's there.

**Arthur Davis**

There are quite a number of times recently and I, well, recently in quotes, it's been it's been a while now but I haven't I haven't played the piano there anytime in in my memory.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, honestly I stopped playing it, not because it was a bad piano, they take great care of it but because it was a little harder on my hands. It's a lot of work to play piano with heavy action and as the hall gets more humid with the dancers, the action gets stiffer and stiffer as the night goes on and then my hands are killing me.

**Arthur Davis**

Definitely.

**Julie Vallimont**

But there's also subtler reasons. Like it's easier to be in tune with the other instruments on a keyboard. It's easier to play arrangments that you've prepared if you know what the timbre is gonna be like.

**Arthur Davis**

A lot of a lot of folks I played with like it when I play keyboard better because I can set up so that I'm looking at them.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. You can make eye contact.

**Arthur Davis**

Which I definitely like as a collaborator, musical collaborator. It is very logical, makes a lot of sense, but I'm always torn. "Cause I, you know, there's a big, you know, with some bandmates we have this kind of running thing, whenever there's a piano, I'm like, I'm gonna play the piano and they're like, no, you're not! Occasionally I win, but I would say most the time I don't, and that's okay if I don't you know.

**Julie Vallimont**

No, it's like, it is these little things like sightlines. Can you see your physical proximity to people and then there's also like, the monitor mix is easier for everybody to balance if there's not an acoustic piano. Otherwise, the mandolin player has to crank up their monitor really loud so they can hear themselves over the piano and you know, and so I think that's another sign of the change. Like today's contra music is, it's more subtle, it's more textured, more arrangements require sound systems. You don't have to be able to see your bandmates if you're just plunking along to the awesome chords to you know, March of St. Timothy. Why do you need careful eye contact for that? You know, you can hear most of what like when I used to play at the scout house, I remember Cal Howard, who played bass for many, many years as Yankee Ingenuity and every other band that came through there. When I would play with him, he would sit in with us sometimes, I mean, sit in with us, I felt like I was sitting in with him. I was just so thrilled, he would watch my left hand on the piano and just follow me. I didn't have to talk to him. It was amazing. But I'm also not doing fancy things, you know, I'm not doing things outside of what he would expect to find. And that's a real sweet spot.

**Arthur Davis**

Yeah, it's and it's it's one of those things there's no you know, you know, everything has to evolve and You know, I think that there's, there's great, great value to, you know, both ends of that spectrum and, and in between. I hope that as things evolve, we, as a community, we continue to, look at those older traditions, older styles as well, and like, you know, borrow and use those things. And I think that that, like, you know, stealing from the past and while at the same time creating new things is like, I don't know as good of a definition of a living tradition as I can kind of come up with for myself.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are some of these new things?

**Arthur Davis**

I don't know, I mean, I guess as you were saying like having bands like be more higher like levels of arranging and and you know and texture as you were saying having, you know different instrumentation different you know, incorporating different types of rhythmic grooves and I you know a lot of things like that when I think of a lot of more modern contra dance music, which is really awesome. I think that a living tradition evolves and also is like always borrowing from whence it has come. I think that is happening in the wider community. For sure. I hope it continues that way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Right. And what are the factors that decide if it will or not?

**Arthur Davis**

Right, people.

**Julie Vallimont**

You solved it!

**Arthur Davis**

And everyone listening!

**Julie Vallimont**

Because it's interesting. It's like these varying things of like, what do communities want and need like some people go to a dance because it is their community. Other people do it as like, entertainment, an activity to do. And then there's what the callers want. And then there's what the dancers want. And then sometimes callers and musicians have to do what dancers want, or else they don't come to the dances.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. It's all so multi dimensional.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then dancers end up, some people like the slower tempos and the groovier feel and the happier vibe and some people like intensity and excitement.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. And I think, you know, it's all good. I mean, because it's all I mean, I think when it comes down to it, as I said before, like you know, I think that at its best contra dancing and social dancing more generally, should serve as a way to bring people together and build relationships amongst people. It's the people who are doing it who are getting that benefit. And so if it can benefit the people on all sides of the equation, then that's then it's being successful, I think. I think just to finish I think we can learn from, like past because like, obviously these things have survived to alert, you know, they've, you know, they've, they've survived through some number of years and in some in some form and, and that is a testament to the fact that it has, like, you know, through some through line through time built a community, or like there's has been community built around those things. And so as we move forward, we can learn lessons about community building from that through line from the past as well as adapting it to serve the needs of the current community.

**Julie Vallimont**

And different communities have different have different needs. Right.

**Arthur Davis**

It's also neat because then, like contra dancing has different, like you go to Portland, Maine, it feels very different than like going to somewhere else, I don't know, Portland, they stomp their feet a lot. It's excellent. But it's it's a lot more foot stamping than other places. And it's it's great but different. It looks different in different places as it should.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was just actually just talking about what you said before. So what you say now is even though that's great, we can talk about current Arthur and not past Arthur. But I just gonna circle back to something else you said before when you're talking about like the high schoolers who came up and whether or not they were executing the dance well. And I was like, there's just a lot of different ways you could think about executing a dance well. And to me, are you having fun with each other and taking good care of each other? That to me is executing the dance well.

**Arthur Davis**

in that case, those kids were picture perfect.

**Julie Vallimont**

Nailing it. Is it really about the moves and getting there on time? The moves in contra dancing are not that exciting.

**Arthur Davis**

It comes down to a......

**Julie Vallimont**

Woooo.......a circle. You know, like that's kind of not the point.

**Arthur Davis**

Circle left, circle right.

**Julie Vallimont**

And watching groups like I love playing for people who don't know how to dance, but are very enthusiastic about learning and care to be there with each other. I think all those things have to happen. And they're just doing Virginia Reel they're doing Strip the Willow all night. And they don't care and it doesn't matter if you're on time with the music or not.

**Arthur Davis**

Well, it's funny you should say that particular example because so last summer I was in Scotland. And we were way up north in Scotland. And we were camping at this campground and we saw signs. Like just little, like printer paper sign for a ceilidh. And we're like, well, that's great. Well, like we should go. So we we showed up and it was it was like kind of the finale of this kind of camp for local kids in the town. And there was actually some of the some of the folks in the band were, I think, from some pretty well known bands that I can't remember the name of now in Scotland. But the big hit of the night for sure we did it twice in fact, which it was, the dance was just Strip the Willow. So it started, you know, they've started playing some high energy Scottish reels and, and the top couple, you know, we had no idea what was going on, there was very little calling that happened at this evening but so we the top couple started swinging for about, you know, maybe an A parts worth, and then started Stripping the Willow down. And then when they got about four couples down the next top couples swung for like about an A, and then started Stripping the Willow down. And we did that I would say, for about 20 minutes, two times and it was the most fun thing I've like ever done in my life. It was just like, it was the thing to do right then. And it was you know, I knew no one in that hall at all. And it was one of those moments. It was like, it was the thing for the moment. It was pretty awesome.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, it's magic. I mean, I don't want to give the impression that like one is better than the other. But like I've also been out at dances where the room is full of experienced dancers and the band is fired up and sounding amazing. The sound is perfect, the caller's calling this really amazing dance with good flow. The dancers are all nailing the choreography, and everyone is moving together like a machine it's like a human like they're moving together in harmony effortlessly. That's also transcendent.

**Arthur Davis**

In a totally different way, but just as transcendent.

**Julie Vallimont**

Just as transcendent and that's a different way of building community. You know, there's some times when you talk to your partner, your neighbor while you're dancing and build community that way. There's other times when you kind of build community, just by all being together.

**Arthur Davis**

And doing the same thing in really, really good time with each other. And you can like, know that the next person is going to be right there. At this same moment that you are there, you know.

**Julie Vallimont**

So I think the magic is for any of these forms of contra dancing is keeping the spirit of community and joy and all of it. Wherever you get your joy from, and whatever your community is like. Yeah, I mean, I feel one of the reasons I wanted to start this project just because I feel like there isn't as much contra piano as there used to be. And there isn't as much boom chuck contra piano as there used to be and so I just wanted to explore why people play the tunes they do and the choices they make. And you know, what do people want without answering like what's right or wrong or anything like that. So do you have any thoughts? I know that's a big question to ask you to like dump on you. But do you have any thoughts about that?

**Arthur Davis**

State it one more time.

**Julie Vallimont**

On like contra piano is an instrument and boom chuck piano and seeing less of it in our dance halls now than there used to be.

**Arthur Davis**

I mean, as I said, I think that, I mean for me it's something, it's a style that I really enjoy the sound of and the and the energy of

**Arthur Davis**

Sometimes I hear the word dorky, which I love. I love the word dorky.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes. It's an honorific.

**Arthur Davis**

Yes, for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

But not to interrupt you, but talking to Yann. And he was talking about Quebec tunes and they call them glorious tunes the old style you just want to sing along to. That's such a good word. Glorious tunes.

**Arthur Davis**

Oh, that's excellent.

**Arthur Davis**

But I think that you know, as I was saying, I think that there's a lot of, like, evolution which is necessary. And but I think that as we as I don't know, I think with piano in particular, I think that it has an energy that it brings and a kind of driving force in like under everything else in the band. A kind of presence. That is really, it's hard to achieve with a lot of other instruments. And I also think that with, you know, going back to the conversation of real, you know, having like real pianos, when there's a real piano in the hall, there's something about the fact that it's kind of like, a part of the building to me that makes the connection between the music and the space. I don't know, like, feel different than playing a keyboard and that's not necessarily a style thing, but I think that maybe besides an association that, you know, maybe also going back to the conversation of when there weren't sound systems and needing to project sounds so that everyone can hear in the hall. I think that, like there's important lessons to be learned from that kind of, from the thinking about those kinds of connections between the space where you are and the people inhabiting that space and how you can connect all those pieces. That I think to me, from, you know, my perspective as a piano player, I think that it can be a big part of bridging that, you know, creating that kind of space in the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, some of my favorite experiences are playing at Pinewoods camp, because they always have acoustic pianos there. And in the main dancehall and C sharp, it's almost acoustic, it's like one of the closest things we get these days to doing it acoustic, like when I run sound at Pinewoods, I try to just use it to amplify the instruments just enough so that everybody can hear it. But so that it's almost transparent. You can't tell where the instrument stops and the sound begins, you know, and having that acoustic piano there changes the whole feel. It's something about the wood of the piano and the wood of the floorboards that people are dancing on and the rafters overhead and how that affects the sound and the feel. I don't know it's hard to put into words.

**Arthur Davis**

It is hard to put into words. And I think in terms of the like stylistic part of your question, in terms of piano style, you know, I think that in some ways what it comes down to for me is like, that style of accompanying the melody player and putting, pulling the melody player out front and having the melody of the tune, you know, be almost like a song that's like, that's the, kind of the thing and, and, you know the piano is creating this rhythmic drive behind that, but just, you know, kind of supporting the melody and not kind of having its own thing be, you know, kind of a thing for the sake of itself.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right.

**Arthur Davis**

I think that that's like not necessarily the way it should be all the time, but I think that the intricacies of tunes are so cool and, and the way that different people bring out tunes is so, it's so unique and I love hearing musical presentations that really bring, that feature that aspect.

**Julie Vallimont**

That feature the tune front and center.

**Arthur Davis**

Feature the tune front and center.

**Julie Vallimont**

And supporting the tune whatever it needs or wants to be supported.

**Arthur Davis**

And often that's a kind of a, you know, a boom chuck kind of piano style. It could be something else. But I think it's a it's a great part of the mosaic of contra dance music That, you know, I think is something that I'd love to see continue to see out in the world.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely. You know, there's lots of different ways to do it. And that's what makes it fun is all this wonderful diversity that we have. But I think there are some parts that are worth making sure we hang on to. Because we could sort of just lose them by accident if we're not careful.

**Arthur Davis**

Right. And I think that's a good point. Because I think it's not necessarily, it's like a choice to, like for to play. No, it's all it's all choices about how we play and so, yeah, I think it'd be easy. It'd be easy to have that happen without thinking about it too much. Or, you know losing the same way we lose, you know, we lose skills that we as a community, as a society stop doing on a broad scale. And, you know, I think from time to time we see waves of people thinking, oh, like we've lost this skill as a society, we should go back and not forget that skill or that piece of knowledge and I don't know. Boom chuck piano is probably pretty mundane, small, insignificant example of that. But hey, so it's a I think, it's a not a bad one to not forget.

**Arthur Davis**

I mean it's all relative, right? Right. It's all relative.

**Julie Vallimont**

But for the small laser beam scope of this podcast I think it’s a good thing to talk about. And, you know, it's like a tradition, like there is no overarching contra tradition really. What there is, is a series of many small decisions made by many dance communities around the country. That then add up to these trends, but they're not all conscious. You know, people aren't saying we're gonna stop using acoustic pianos and switch to keyboards, it's just more like, like maybe town halls don't have pianos in them anymore. Or maybe the people who played the pianos are more into guitar or keyboards now, and they don't maintain the pianos or you know, generational changes, value changes, the advent of sound systems and how that changes the need for a piano. All these things, that how guitar is more of a common solo rhythm instrument than it used to be, the only rhythm instrument and all these little changes and then all of a sudden a thing happens. And then the people who play boom chuck piano are older and maybe the new people hear it and do it or don't hear it and don't do it. Like if a tradition is passed on, through learning and doing but if you come up in a tradition and you don't hear this anymore, how are you going to know how great it is?

**Arthur Davis**

Totally. Yeah, for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thank you Arthur,so much.

**Arthur Davis**

This is such a fun project and I can't wait to hear all of the different voices.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah till next time.

**Arthur Davis**

Till next time.