**Contra Pulse Episode 7 - David Cantieni Part 1**

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra pulse! This is Julie Vallimont. Today we talk with David Cantieni. David is a multi talented musician who plays flute, saxophone, bombard, whistle, and feet, along with numerous other wind instruments, including classical oboe. He is a founding member of the bands Wild Asparagus and Swallowtail, and has been an important fixture of the Western Massachusetts contra dance scene for many years, in addition to traveling the country with his bands. He is the a long time master of the Guiding Star Grange in Greenfield Massachusetts, which has a rich and vibrant history and a full schedule of dance events. Well usually.

We talked about David’s roots and how he learned to play for Contra dances, his transition from classical oboe to traditional music on the flute and other instruments, the excitement of the bombard and the influence of French tunes, how he has seen the dance scene change in the last 30 years, some of his favorite tunes to play, and a lot more. We had so much fun talking, we just couldn’t stop, so this interview is divided into two parts. We’re wearing masks, and it was a hot day on the porch, so thanks for bearing with us!

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hello David! Welcome to Contra Pulse.

**David Cantieni**

Well good to be on your porch. It is so good to see you.

**Julie Vallimont**

This is the first soundcheck I've done in quite some time, I don't know about you.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah, I guess so. Except I've been trying to do you know, video things, which is —

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**David Cantieni**

It's not my cup of tea, I don't think. I'm more into the immediate and personal.

**Julie Vallimont**

What kind of video things have you been doing?

**David Cantieni**

Well, I've done been doing some recording for my students, but also just thinking about posting and you know, curious about it because I feel that my desire to share music is probably just as strong as people's desire to be part of music. You know, I think it's showing us. And I've always believed in everybody being able to make music and having, that opportunity, and now, it's really that way I think. I was just sitting here thinking about how many people more must be working on playing and singing and doing their own rather than relying on those of us who have put ourselves forward.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I certainly hope so. It's wonderful because I think what people are sharing online doesn't have to be perfect. We can't make it perfect now.

**David Cantieni**

Oh, absolutely. I love seeing like people just doing their whatever it is and going like well, that wasn't that good, but here it is.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it's interesting because we don't have a lot of recordings of contra dance music that aren't either studio albums, or really raw live recordings, just from a recorder somewhere in the room or off the board. There's only been a couple bands who have done proper live recordings, like Wild Asparagus did one. So it's interesting. We don't get to hear this music much if you're not there in person. It's funny to take such an old tradition and make it technological, but I mean, as a community, we're embracing it. I won't say everyone as individuals is embracing it. 'Cause I think for some people, it's really hard. But, it's been amazing. I'm glad to hear you're still been playing.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah, I've been thinking a lot, you know, and this traditional music is social music. And that means it's also for ourselves and it's to share and to be played together. So many of us play socially in sessions of one sort or another, jam sessions or whatever, and that's part of the whole experience. And so now there are people getting together at a distance or in the family. I get to play at home with Gus.

**Julie Vallimont**

Lucky you. Lucky Gus.

**David Cantieni**

I hope so. I hope he feels that way.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, you and Gus — I remember years ago, I stopped by your house and you were playing tunes and you have such a wonderful repertoire of shared tunes. It's really great.

**David Cantieni**

He's learned a lot of the band, you know, the Asparagus tunes, you know, a fair amount due to pressure, I guess. And then there are all of the tunes that he's interested in that I try to learn which aren't particularly good flute tunes, but that's an interesting aspect too, you know, because I learn what's hard for him and what he likes and his range.....

**Julie Vallimont**

And Gus specifically plays tenor banjo?

**David Cantieni**

Yes, and some guitar he was working on guitar and mandolin, but I'd say his main instrument is the tenor banjo.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. What do you think is the main difference between a good tenor banjo tune and a good flute tune?

**David Cantieni**

I can only speak for what his sort of aesthetic is, but to me they're less melodic tunes, more pattern oriented, and of course they don't go too high, because it gets really uncomfortable to play up the neck, especially on his banjo, because it's so long, longer neck than some. He keeps saying, well, maybe I should have a shorter neck banjo. So that's one in particular. A lot of the G tunes will go up to high B or higher.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm so glad you are still playing tunes together. Makes me happy to think about it. So, let's talk a little bit about how you got started playing for contra dances. You've played with the bands Wild Asparagus and Swallowtail for a long time now.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah. I was listening to Anna's little history, Anna Patton, and our early days are sort of similar. I studied classical oboe. I think she was always on clarinet. And even before that, I was introduced to recorder because my parents were into playing together and we all played recorders together, and then later during the Renaissance music rediscovery in the late 60s, when I was in high school, I learned that music and a lot of the Renaissance music is dance music. So I guess I had a propensity to play dance music and not only that... my favorite classical music was all Baroque stuff on the oboe, and a lot of those are dances. At least called dances, like the minuet and the sarabande and the bouree — all those are dance forms. I was studying classical oboe through college and doing freelancing. And during college I got into dancing, which many of us did. One of the dance heydays, I would say, was in the late 70s, like 77-78 -79. The whole area in Northampton was burgeoning with young contra dance bands, people just trying stuff out and the proto-Swallowtail started around that time. I wasn't in it but Christy Keevil started a band at Amherst College called the Rotten Apples, and of course they were pretty raw and pretty rotten, I guess. But I mean, Christy was a great bassoon player and we played together in the Amherst College Orchestra. But I think he found that the bassoon repertoire was limited and I don't think he ever took the bassoon to contra dance music. He was playing accordion and calling and so that started the Swallowtail trend. And my roommate in Northampton invited me to come to a jam rehearsal and I started playing recorder, again, for contra dancing, didn't really think of trying the oboe till quite a bit later. I guess you know recorder is not in the Contra dance tradition. I remember there was Jerry, what's name from Vermont who played recorder. And so there were a few of us, he was a bit older. What was his name? Not only that, but he had only one hand and then the stump of an arm and somehow he managed to play the recorder with..... Like a pipe and tabor or something. Yeah. Then let's see in Swallowtail, I guess I probably ended up starting to use the oboe and the curious part about that, and many musicians will sympathize with this is that since I was studying oboe and reading classical music from an early age, it was really hard to play without looking at music. Even though I could play the recorder just fine without looking at music. The oboe was a whole different thing and it took me a long time. For some reason, I just remember that as being a strange stumbling block. Yeah, so. Swallowtail, we had this harebrained idea to do a cross country tour in 1981. Whether we were ready or not.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who were the members of Swallowtail at the time?

**David Cantieni**

Well, the same as they are now. Let's see, so that was in 1981. So, what? Almost 40 years? So it was Ron Grosslein, George Marshall, Tim Van Egmond, myself, David Cantieni. And who am I missing? Tim Triplett on piano. In 1981 he was finishing working on his dissertation, doctoral dissertation in philosophy. So we were driving and he was writing longhand. And we played in some crazy places. Yellowstone Park, we went to Helena Montana, where they'd never had live music before for a dance. Maybe they'd never even had a dance. We just talked someone into letting us do it. We stayed in someone's tipi out in the prairie. It was crazy, really fun. And as far as I know, the first time a contra dance band ever tried to tour.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, were there no other bands who were travelling?

**David Cantieni**

No, it was just a lark. It was a summer vacation really. You know if we came home with any money at all, it would have been great. And I guess we did. No, it paid for itself.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did it take a lot of convincing for some of these, if people aren't used to having fans travel to their dances or were they all kind of intrigued by the idea.

**David Cantieni**

I guess they were. A lot of you know, because it was personal contacts. Ron Grosslein had relatives in Minnesota. So we went there. Oh, and out of the blue, I just contacted Prairie Home Companion, we played on Prairie Home Companion. I just wrote them a letter and sent them a demo tape and and we were on. So we did that. We met some of the people that were on Prairie Home Companion in the way early days. I remember there was a drummer Rhett Matic??? and of course Garrison was there and I think our friend Pop Wagner I don't know if he was on that particular show.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, what a trip! Did that trip change things for your band at all going through that experience together?

**David Cantieni**

Well, I'm sure all the playing helped, you know, I mean, because we were I don't remember much other you know, that we had a good time. We played, we were carrying this big sound system around we'd unloaded out of this van and set it up and all beginner dances of course. You know, just like very, very rawest of raw. We went to Spokane we met Penn Fix who's one of the people then we play as I remember we played for some fair there was a fair and we were driving, you know, through these crowds of people in Spokane and set up and played on there. Maybe not for a dance, that might have just been a concert.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. Noah and I was supposed to play in Spokane last month. At a square dance convention. Interesting overlap.. And you had George Marshall with you? Calling. So you're traveling with two built in callers, and Greorge and Tim Van Egmond was calling. In Swallowtail Tim and George would split the calling did they do that back then too?

**David Cantieni**

Yeah, they did. They did. And George had already been out to the west coast. He had started maybe among others, but he was one of the first to get contra dancing going in the Seattle area. He's working out there. I remember something about he was working on in a shingle mill or something near Seattle for the summer.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, George, I definitely want to have him on the podcast later too to talk about his experiences. We, Noah and I, Buddy System, did what we called George Tour, where he does the Pacific Northwest Tour, which you've done many times. And he was telling us some of the stories and they're great. So Swallowtail was the thing. And then how did Wild Asparagus get started?

**David Cantieni**

Well, our second cross country tour in 1982, Timm Triplett was finishing his dissertation and couldn't go and for some reason, we decided that we wanted to do it anyway. George found Ann Percival, she had just moved to the area. She was like this beginning piano player, but you know, could do it. Though I have to say when we got together for rehearsals, she really didn't know the difference between a jig and a reel.

**Julie Vallimont**

I can relate.

**David Cantieni**

But we took her on tour.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, that's a good way to learn though.

**David Cantieni**

And she played guitar some and we did these concerts, and we sang, she sang, which was a nice addition to the band though we all tried to sing. I'd say that we were. It was good to have her heading up any of the singing stuff. And, you know, during the course of that tour, it turned out that Ann and I were the only ones that drank coffee. So every morning we went out, looking for coffee. And that's how our relationship began. I would say, every day it was pretty, pretty fun. Pretty good. And again, we went all cross country. I think we played Yellowstone a second time and it was for the crew at Yellowstone they have these entertainment things and you know, just driving through all that beautiful country and meeting people all across, they also showed us all these hot springs and we really got to see some of the best spots because people would show us.

**Julie Vallimont**

Beautiful. People in this community have been very like hospitable you know, they want to... it's, it feels like being a traveling minstrel a little bit, you know, or a bard or something. It's really interesting. It's great that you and Ann bonded over coffee because now like for many contra musicians, looking for good coffee is a time honored tradition, especially with new waves of coffee, third wave coffee or whatever. So you were doing it way back before it was cool. The original hipsters. So, Wild Asparagus.

**David Cantieni**

Oh, yeah so we got back and, of course, Tim wasn't about to give up his position in Swallowtail. And I Ann and I wanted to play together and, and a lot of the other band people had other jobs. Ron was going back to work at UMass. George didn't really have anything else to do. Tim van Egmond was also working on his storytelling career and stuff like that. So it ended up being Ann and George and me and we started a band. We called ourselves Three Hand Reel. And it was no fiddle, which is pretty weird because George played a lot of concertina and by then I was playing oboe, and I had picked up a silver flute in Milwaukee at a, you know,

**Julie Vallimont**

Like a secondhand store? A pawn shop.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah, pawn shop, that's what it's called. So I got this flute at a pawn shop and it was decent, a silver Gemeinhardt pretty well worn out and I finished wearing it out. And so I was starting to play flute more. I had one of Ralph Sweet's fifes. I think that's how I really got into doing the keyless and not you know, going from recorder to more traditional fingering type things like whistle and fife and and keyless flute. But I had the silver flute. So we got back, I was playing oboe, I was playing flute. And there was no fiddle. And we still got hired. So I guess we were okay. We had our first in 1983-84, was probably the winter of 83. We got hired at Brasstown as I remember, for our first official dance thing. Whatever it was, I don't know if it was Christmas. It might have been Christmas at Brasstown.

**Julie Vallimont**

The country dance school?

**David Cantieni**

John C. Campbell.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then at some point you added Becky?

**David Cantieni**

Well no, our first fiddler, so we made a recording without without fiddle and of course the classical influences did show in our arrangements and our choice of music. So we added a fiddle, Ann was rather adamant ultimately about wanting another musician and a fiddler and it was Vandy Kaynor. And that was probably 84-85 and he played with us for a number of years and it was great. It really affected our sound. You know, he was a great experienced dance musician already at that point. Having grown up with the Kaynors in the Foregone Conclusions. I think he was part of that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Legendary. Notorious. Lotta different words.

**David Cantieni**

So Vandy and then when he stopped playing, we found Kerry Elkin to play with us. And he was, I would say responsible for our immersion in the Irish vein of music. Though he played a lot of different genres. I can't say that he did much old time, but he did a lot of French Canadian and Irish. And before Kerry played with us, we were much less, he was fairly adamant about keeping Irish tunes with Irish tunes and old time tunes with old time tunes and he didn't want to mix the genres and we were before that really just fine with it all and, you know, again, that's just an aesthetic choice. I would say that predominantly over the years we have kept to Kerry's aesthetic because now we're doing so many original tunes that it's hard to say that you know, it's we'll obviously mix original tunes with whatever seems to go.

**Julie Vallimont**

But that aesthetic is still there kind of underlying things?

**David Cantieni**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

What was your repertoire before you started playing with Kerry?

**David Cantieni**

Very eclectic and it was New England, more New England, more sort of French. I don't know if it was French Canadian, but just sort of more...I feel like the repertoire was fairly static. And I know there were a number of books, you know, there was A Thousand Fiddle Tunes and Ralph Sweet was really getting big at that time. He had a book that he published but of course, if you played for Ralph, he would say okay, play page 18 in my book, or whatever, and it was nice sets of tunes. You know, it was sets of tunes as you were saying Dudley was not into medleys really but somewhere in there, you know, people did start changing tunes and mixing up tunes a little bit. And I just remember feeling that the the repertoire was very limited. And when we were working with Vandy, it was always like, well, you know, where are we going to go? It was a funny time that way. And then when I got into Irish and Kerry was playing Irish, it was just like, all of a sudden there was this huge repertoire of stuff that you know, some of it was good for dance and some not. So you had to choose what were the good dance tunes or would work.

**Julie Vallimont**

Of course , Kerry had excellent instincts as a dance fiddler. He would know which tunes would be suited or not. And some Irish tunes, just for the listeners. The phrasing is a little less clear. And perhaps not as good for dancing, or the way the rhythmic emphasis is, there's a lot of little subtle things that make a tune good for dancing or not good for dancing. Did you change the way you play the tune sometimes?

**David Cantieni**

Oh, absolutely, I mean, I feel that even though I mostly play Irish tunes I'm not steeped in .... it's kind of like, well, we all have our own style, you know, and so I remember getting together with people like having jams and saying, well, this guy's is sort of an old time player but he knows a lot of Irish tunes and they would play the tunes in a sort of an old time, with a old time rhythm and, nothing wrong with with that at all. Unless you're trying to be totally traditional, whatever that is, because I think totally traditional is and that's the thing about traditional music it's for, I think for each of us individually to make our own, we're given permission to make our own music, which is not like classical music. I was just thinking of it recently. The fact that when you're presented with a piece to play, and you're playing anything composed, somebody else is telling you what notes they have chosen are the right ones to play. And it's kind of nice to to be able to rest on somebody else's choices. You don't have to make those choices, on the other hand, you don't really get to, to figure out what it is that really turns you on musically.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and it can be kind of paralyzing. I also was a classical musician for a long time before playing trad music, and trying to play someone else's intentions and the whole concept of doing it right. And there being a right. The thing that really amazed me about trad music when I discovered it is that we're all a conduit for this tradition, these tunes pass through us and they get slightly changed by passing through us and then they pass on to the next person.

**David Cantieni**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that was just really incredible.

**David Cantieni**

Yes,

**Julie Vallimont**

I love the thought of playing tunes that other people played hundreds of years ago.

**David Cantieni**

I have to say, I am not very good at mimicking anybody. But I love learning other people's versions of tunes and at least using their version as a jumping off point. I've listened to a lot of the old recordings and learn tunes from those and I like preserving them because I feel the same way. It's like you're taking something of somebody's essence, either a rhythmic idea or just the set of notes or even the idea of a tune that they played in recreating it in the present and carrying them on that way. Yes. That's part of the tradition. It's a wonderful, wonderful part of this feeling of being in the stream, which brings up the fact that I was playing oboe and whistle, not even whistle but recorder and feeling in the early contra dance days very much of an outsider because even though I think in the contra dance tradition almost anything goes. And my understanding is that in the past, there was a lot of, you basically used what you had, and there were wind players and I think back in 30's and 40's there were bands of, you know, primarily sort of like saxophone and stuff like that. But by the time I started playing it was all very, very fiddle oriented. But in the New England tradition of playing for dances, it was you know, classical instruments would have been used.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, there have been lots of large dance orchestras over time that had all sorts of things in them, horns and all sorts of stuff.

**David Cantieni**

Back at the time when we were starting up there was the Brattleboro brass band, which was cool. It was a great sound, great to dance to.

**Julie Vallimont**

That sounds fun. Do you know who was in that band? Haven't heard of them before. I have to look them up.

**David Cantieni**

Well, I feel even though he didn't, I don't think he plays Any winds, but I think Michael McKernan was involved. He was also in Applejack. You know, Michael McKernan He did some scholarly work and is still doing that he's out in, like Tucson or out West somewhere right now.

**Julie Vallimont**

We can look it up. I'm gonna try to post links to some of these things.

**David Cantieni**

Mike is a great, great resource actually. He did a bunch of sort of historical research and is still doing that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you think at the time do you think that Kerry was one of the first people to bring Irish music into the contra tradition? Were there other people doing it at the time?

**David Cantieni**

I remember the The Greenfield...what was it?... Dave Kaynor's band with David and Mary Cay Brass and then at some point Stuart Kenney came on, and Bo Bradham was one of the big fiddlers and I think it was in that time period that they started going, oh yeah we're gonna start playing Irish tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is this Greenfield dance band? Peter Siegel was a part of that maybe later?

**David Cantieni**

Eventually, and maybe later Bo Bradham was the fiddler along side Dave Kaynor and they were doing Irish tunes, so I don't know if that was at the same time.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm just interested in the shift between when, like there was a time when at a contra dance you would expect to find New England tunes. And now you can find tunes from any genre that you can make square enough to dance to and even that you can't.

**David Cantieni**

Yes, it's true.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that shift is interesting. And there were a few folks like Randy Miller had an interest in Irish tunes and music and Kerry.

**David Cantieni**

But you know, Randy and Rodney [Miller] did that fabulous recording there were a number of great recordings from back then. But you know, the New England chestnuts is just like, those were sort of the tunes that as you know, as I remember to have to go back and listen, but they were the New England chestnuts. Yeah, classic tunes. And what was the other one with the accordion player who's moved to Seattle now he used to be in Baltimore. Laurie Andres, yeah, yeah, cuz they did an album, they did maybe a number of albums together that were just really top of the line.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. What do you think? Do you notice a difference in the dance experience when you play New England tunes and other kinds of tunes?

**David Cantieni**

Besides the nostalgia?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, besides the nostalgia.

**David Cantieni**

There's a lot of nostalgia. I mean, right now because of the situation. I mean, and maybe even before, I do like going back and reviewing the old contra dance tunes, you know, some of them match up with dances like Chorus Jig and Money Musk and Lamplighters even and Hull's Victory. I just somehow came across Hull's Victory recently and it's like, oh, yeah, that was a great dance and it was great tune, and Petronella of course, which most people know the name of but haven't had a chance to dance, and of course the aesthetic is a little different. In the traditional contra dance days it was more cooperative in a way, because the inactive people were there to serve the actives in a way and you got to stand around and watch these people dance, and then when they came back you had to interact with them. You know, I'm thinking in particular of things like Chorus Jig where the actives are going down the outside they're going down the inside and as inactives you're just standing there watching their antics and it's good, it's good. I think our aesthetic now everyone is like, I want to be active all the time. And I don't want to wait around watch someone else have fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

That sounds so American doesn't it?

**David Cantieni**

Doesn't it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and that's a change.

**David Cantieni**

Oh, absolutely. And I miss the casting off, which is a move that was in almost every dance, you know casting off and right left four, it was all normally with same sex, but you had your arm around whoever it was next to you and...

**Julie Vallimont**

The feeling of that move in Money Musk is my favorite part. Some people love balances in Money Musk. For me it's the moment where you just lock eyes and walk around each other, it's so great. Or Chorus Jig, that magic of when you are going through contra corners. And there's magically a hand out there to reach you at the right place. You know, if you're out you have to take that job very seriously.

**David**

Put your right hand out, or the left hand.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Put the correct hand out.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah. So the I mean the old, those tunes that fit particular dances, of course, are maybe even more nostalgic than some of the others.

**Julie Vallimont**

See, it's interesting because you have really been playing in the contra scene during the advent of dance weekends, countrywide tours, the real shift from there being just a regional scene, which there still is. Many communities still have their own local regional scene where their dancers don't travel. People don't necessarily travel to these communities unless they're passing through. But then also, there's this nationwide circuit that musicians, callers, and dancers will go on.

**David Cantieni**

Yes. And, you know, in this time of isolation, I always thought that the dance community was more in name than in substance. That most dancers were in it for themselves, and the community was momentary. When you came together at a dance you didn't know that much about all these people that you're dancing with. In the past I'm sure that was a lot different because it was like you were saying, communities, you know, physical communities but I'm seeing in this era, that there is a feeling of some kind of cohesiveness all around among whatever the dance community is, even though we're not playing for people anymore, just that feeling that there is a caring group and people taking care of each other in this community, whatever this community is, dancers and musicians.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I've been seeing that too. And it's really wonderful.

**David Cantieni**

So you feel that?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It's like, during this pandemic, I'm especially glad that I live in New England, because everyone is around me.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that makes a big difference. Yeah, I mean, one of the things that I always loved about contra dancing in the beginning is that it's a place where anyone can go and feel welcome, ideally. So I think about people who don't have that, like, who don't have their own community at home and would rely on that community, which is why it's so great that there's online things and zoom calls. You know, it's not the same but...

**David Cantieni**

Yeah. I mean, I haven't tapped into that I really am such a here and now kind of person, it's like a really weak substitute for the real thing and I suppose I still have to figure out personally if and how I'm gonna be part of that. Or maybe I will wait until we can get together and dance again because I know it will happen and it's going to be a good day

**Julie Vallimont**

It's gonna be a good day. Or maybe a few awkward days and then a really good day, but it's gonna be a good day when it finally is ready.

**David Cantieni**

That's what we say. Yes,

**Julie Vallimont**

That's what we say. I find it very encouraging that this is a tradition that is hundreds of years old. It has survived other things before, it's gonna survive this. You know, the lamplighters they're gonna keep the lamps lit.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

So for you as a musician, what, like, what are your? I don't know, this is such an open ended question. I don't know how to ask it. But tell me about any thoughts you have about dance weekends forming and some of the experiences you've had and how that changes the music or what the dancers expect or anything like that. Or something entirely different and you want to talk about because that's a big question.

**David Cantieni**

I have to think about that a little bit. There's always been pressure for people to have a better time, I guess, you know, and it's like, if you go to a dance, you can complain about the people that don't know how to dance or don't know how to swing. And then so people started doing like these advanced contra dance things where it was like or when we were in the early days we'd have little gatherings of people and sometimes I'm sure it felt very exclusive especially to people who weren't invited or didn't know about it and then there became that advanced contra dance trend.

**Julie Vallimont**

Challenging contras.

**David Cantieni**

Challenging contras, which is you know, I can appreciate that. I don't really aspire to that, you know, I totally feel that that this kind of dancing is for everybody and if you're not versed in it, as long as you have fun, it's good thing. On the other hand, just like music, if you're with a group of people that are all in the same groove are all like, able to be at a certain level. There's an awful lot of joy and fun in that too. And so, you know, the dance weekend scene, I think came out of that, you know, people in dance communities going like, well, I want to go to something that's just a little bit better. And some people say it's detracting from the local dances. And I know that before the pandemic hit there were communities complaining or not complaining, but just noticing that the numbers were going down, which could be that there are just so many places to dance, especially here in New England. I mean, you could dance just about every day of the week.

**Julie Vallimont**

You could dance three times on some days of the week.

**David Cantieni**

In multiple places. So it stands to reason that the community might be a little dissipated. Yet, you know, just speaking from the Greenfield scene, even though quite a good number of those dances were not highly attended, the dancing quality was just you could always count on it being good. I mean you could just about go to any dance and it's like, oh, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, these are the dances at the Grange.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah, well, David Kaynor started the dances and actually Swallowtail tried to start, and even before that, I think Applejack had a dance at the Grange, Guiding Star Grange in Greenfield. It was obviously a great dance hall, but it wasn't on anybody's map so, Swallowtail did it maybe a couple times and a few people would come and they'd stick their head in, and they'd see that no one was there, and they go away, and then maybe they'd come back in an hour, and maybe there were enough for one set, so we just didn't get it going. And then when Dave started up, I feel like part of it was just that he was very persistent and got the word out and said, this is gonna be great. You know, just come on.

**Julie Vallimont**

That magic charisma of his.

**David Cantieni**

He did start that, put the Guiding Star Grange on the map and we picked up the first Saturday. Soon after that, when would that have been? Late 80s? Kerry was playing with us in the late 80s. And then maybe just very late 89-90-91 is maybe when we started doing that. Someone will know, it's in the record somewhere.

**Julie Vallimont**

Someone will know. But the Greenfield Grange has flourished to being like one of like a lot of people from out of town consider it like the Mecca. Like Nelson, New Hampshire being a different kind of Mecca. And a place where you could go to dancing every Friday, Saturday night and many Sundays there's something going on.

**David Cantieni**

And, you know, I think well, clearly the facility has a lot to do with it. And in my experience, those dances that really flourish have that kind of resource, and there are other places where the hall just is, you know, there are drawbacks one way or another, and just the physical aspects of these halls makes a huge difference. And again, New England is blessed. I guess culturally, dance halls were a big part of life in New England, many of the town halls had dance facilities, even churches had their function halls that were great dance venues, and many other parts of the country do not have that resource.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, like you think about the Peterborough town hall? What an amazing space for dancing.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah, and there used to be the Walpole Town Hall, which now has been cut up into like little office cubicles. It was a really great dance hall. Walpole, New Hampshire. And I was actually thinking of Northfield, there used to be that Northfield dance that the Foregone Conclusions did and then there was maybe even a Dawn Dance. I remember Swallowtail playing there some of the early days. in Northfield.

**Julie Vallimont**

These these grange halls seem especially suited, the Greenfield Hall, the Montague Grange, which David Kaynor was really instrumental in helping preserve.

**David Cantieni**

The Montpelier one, which is still going well.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you know, some of these dances go well enough that then you can undertake a lot of capital improvements to the hall to make it nicer, but they require some sustenance and you've been deeply involved in the Greenfield Grange, its health and well being for a very long time.

**David Cantieni**

It's getting up there. I think I've been a master of the Grange now for 13, more than 12 years, maybe going on? I don't know what a good number of years 15 years. Before that it was Steve Ball. And there were a number of people. Dave Kaynor was the master of Montague Grange but I don't think he ever was master of Greenfield, of the Guiding Star though he held many offices. I think he's still on the executive committee. But the struggle has been to try to keep the hall monetarily accessible, for rents. Like the Peterborough Hall is way expensive now, you know it went way up. So it's really hard to to have a regular dance there. I don't think the regular dance is there the first Saturday in Peterborough, or is it? Is it in the hall?

**Julie Vallimont**

I played there sometime this year. And it was there.

**David Cantieni**

Maybe they have a special rate.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It's interesting. But yeah, that's the thing. We have to value these things as the community resources that they are. I think it's easier for dancers to not realize how important the hall is, but especially you see it in urban places where halls are harder to find. If the hall disappears, the dance disappears. And if you look in Boston, the VFW dance was huge. For many years and when they lost the VFW, that dance still continues, but it changed a lot in moving around from Springstep to the Scout House. It can be very difficult. So we have to we have to cherish our halls and cherish the people who do all the invisible ugly work of running them.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah. and cherish the people that built them. You know, I mean, that's the way we feel about Guiding Star. I mean, I definitely do. It was built as a dance hall in 1936. And I wrote a little bit about that. Right now, we're trying to..... We have, I feel, stabilized the hall as far as not losing the hall in the near future because of the lack of revenue. But when I was writing about it, I wrote about 1936, which would have been the middle of the Depression. And I don't know if there's anything in the record about that, you know, the fact that they were able to build the hall, at that time is a big testament to the usefulness, the need then too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like dancing, which is a relatively low cost, accessible activity is so important in a time like that it's too bad that in a pandemic, we can't do it. If this were just an economic recession, we would all stop traveling and go dancing and do cheaper things at home.

**David**

Exactly. Ann was saying just recently, it's like in spite of all the crises that we see in the world, it seemed that at least we would have dancing.

**David Cantieni**

But no.

**Julie Vallimont**

Not yet.

**David Cantieni**

Isolated dancing, and it certainly is not the same.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. No, it's pretty hard. I mean, some callers and choreographers are starting to write little choreography for people who are far apart, but you know, that's good. Let them try it and enjoy their music from it, but it's not gonna scratch the itch for most people, of course.

**David Cantieni**

Yeah, that's what I find.

**Julie Vallimont**

But I do think it'll just be like riding a bicycle. Nobody's gonna forget. The moves aren't even that hard.

**David**

No, they're not, if you can walk, you can dance. Right?

**Julie Vallimont**

And it's a chance for us as a community to reconsider what's important to us. And sometimes I feel like people get caught up in what band it is and what caller it is and whether they like the dance, and they kind of forget about just the joy of being together. Or we take it for granted that we can always be together. So I'm really looking forward to that feeling of re-discovery. It's interesting going back to halls, it's interesting how some characteristics of a hall can change the kind of community it creates. In the Guiding Star Grange the fact that the the stage is so big. That's really where I learned to play for contra dances and many people did, even though I first danced in Maine. And then I really learned in Boston, but in Boston, there were no stages that you could sit on during the dance. And the fact that like, especially during David's dances, where you could just sit up on stage and watch, you didn't have to be a musician. You could even talk backstage while the musicians are playing. They're so tolerant.

**David Cantieni**

We always love to have company, it's always good to have people to hang out with on the stage.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that really makes the feeling that the musicians and the dancers, everyone's all the same people. You're not just up on the stage separate from everyone. And I used to just sit up there and watch how it all worked and listen and learn, and you can sit in, and many people have done that over the years. That's a wonderful thing. But you need a big enough stage to do it.

Apologies for any typos. Thanks to Ellen Royalty and Margaret Youngberg for their help in preparing this transcript.