Contra Pulse Episode 10 - LissaSchneckenburger

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello and welcome to contra pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This episode we hear from Lissa Schneckenburger, the talented fiddler and singer. Raised in a small town in Maine and now living in Brattleboro, Vermont, Lissa grew up with music. She began playing fiddle at the age of six, inspired by her parent’s interest in folk music. She played for contra dances for many years as a teen and in her 20s including with the band Phantom Power, and in 2001, she graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music with a degree in contemporary improvisation. She has been performing and teaching music around the world ever since. Lissa’s album Dance features beloved country dance tunes in a beautiful setting. These days, she performs often with the band Low Lily, and recently released the solo album Thunder in My Arms, inspired by her experiences as a foster parent. She has a really interesting perspective on music and a lot of thoughts about community building. It was wonderful to speak with her.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Great. Hello, Lissa, and welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Hi. Thanks so much for having me. Julie.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm so glad to have you here on the porch. It is again, a hot day. In the end of July. It's kind of muggy, there's a little breeze but not a lot. So we'll do our best. Thank you for coming out. I'm so glad that you live nearby.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Me too. Yeah, it's a good nearby to be.

**Julie Vallimont**

So we're going to talk about contra dance music. And I would just love if you want to tell us a little bit about how you got started playing for dances, because people who are newer dancers might not have had the chance to dance to your playing, but you have a very long and rich history playing for dances.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yes, I did play for a lot of dances although not recently. I... boy, when I was little, I started taking fiddle lessons when I was eight years old from a fiddler named Greg Boardman in Lewiston, Maine. And that was exciting for my whole family for lots of reasons. But one of the big reasons was that he would invite us to participate in community events. And that's really my entry into the contra dance world and also my whole family's entry into the folk scene in general. Greg was part of the Maine Country Dance Orchestra, which was, they were all sort of Dudley Laufman devotees, and they were all kind of peripheral members of Dudley's band, and then had branched off to form the Maine Country Dance Orchestra with that ethos. And so I remember the very first contra dance I ever went to, was must have been the winter after I started taking lessons with Greg. So I don't know, I would have been eight or nine. And he did an annual benefit for a bunch of years for Habitat for Humanity. And it was called the Mighty Cloud of Fiddlers and it was literally just every fiddler you could find in the entire state of Maine and a bunch of imports from New Hampshire and Massachusetts. And, you know, every fiddler crawled out from under their rock to come out to this, this little, or big benefit, and it was a big contra dance. It was in Lewiston? I think they had it at like, I don't know, in the armory building, or it was this gigantic gymnasium. I mean, I was little so it felt very, very big. And, you know, 100 fiddlers on stage and hundreds of dancers in the hall and everybody just whooping and hollering and screaming. And so that was my first dance. And I went, I brought my fiddle and my whole family went and you know, you could just sit up on stage and play along with whatever you knew, or try to learn a tune on the fly, or you could go down and dance and I think my friend, family friend Cindy Larock actually invited me out onto the floor for my very first dance, and I loved it so much that I actually asked her to dance with me every dance after that for the rest of the night and you know, she was a avid dancer and not a nine year old. She was an adult. So she eventually had to tell me that, you know, she wanted to dance with some other people. But that was it. I was totally bitten by the contra dance bug. Everybody has that moment when they realize that they're obsessed with dancing and they just want to do it all the time. And so it happened pretty early for me. And luckily, my family was supportive and and we went to a bunch of dances after that. So the the Maine Country Dance Orchestra had a monthly dance in Bowdoinham, Maine. And we went to all of those and sometimes I'd sit in with the band and sometimes I'd dance and then geez, Scrod Pudding had a monthly dance in Bowdoinham, Maine also. So we went to all of those. And then as I grow up, as I got older, I started converting all of my friends to become contra dance fans, partly because as I was a young teenager, I needed people to drive me. Eventually my parents got tired and they didn't want to go to two or three dances every week? They thought, you know, one a month, you know once in a while was was enough for them, so I started convincing my older friends that already had their driver's license to go dancing with me and converted a whole bunch of new dancers that way and then finally got my license and started driving my friends around. And I formed my first contra dance band. Geez, when I was 15 or 16. I met John Cote, who's a great guitarist from Lewiston, Maine. And yeah, we formed a band and played for contra dances all through high school and even into college a little bit. The band was called Wake the Neighbors.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wake the Neighbors! Classic band.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

So, yeah, and then you know, from there, I gosh, I met David Kaynor when I was a teenager, he was doing a gig up in Maine and through the friend I mentioned to you, Cindy Larock, she was instrumental in me meeting almost all of my folk heroes as a kid. And so she actually hired me and David Kaynor for a gig where David was playing guitar and calling for a school show. And I was playing fiddle. And then that was a really important meeting for me. David is so encouraging of young musicians and and I had a great time playing with him. And he started hiring me to come play his dance here in Greenfield, Massachusetts. Wow, that was my first out of out of state gig. Yeah, in fact, he actually set up I remember it was a tour, like a little weekend tour he did, he set it up with Bill Olsen and I so that we could carpool. And we did the Thursday night Cambridge dance, and then Friday and Saturday in Greenfield I believe. And then we drove home on Sunday. And I did a whole bunch of little weekends like that with David, growing up and made a huge impression on me in terms of my dance, fiddling and ideas about what makes great dance music and what's fun to dance to and how to how to enrich community and how important all of that is.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

So that's sort of my two contra dance hubs or orbits of music and dance were Bowdoinham, Maine. And and then, you know, spreading out from there, all the great dancing that was happening around the state of Maine, and then Greenfield, Massachusetts and spreading out from there, all the great dancing that's been happening in this central Mass, Southern Vermont area, southern New Hampshire.

**Julie Vallimont**

Nice. It makes my heart so happy hearing all these names. Yes, hearing this whole story is so wonderful.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, me too. I mean, I feel very lucky to have met these community builders over time who have included me in their communities, because then I feel so rich from getting to meet all of the other people in those communities and getting to rub shoulders with such great musicians. And that's what keeps me going as a musician is that community aspect of people creating a beautiful experience together and how that sustains you over time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Me too. Yes. That's why I do it. But you say it so eloquently.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, I mean, there's for sure. I mean, I had other, you know, people tried to draw me out down these other paths. You know, I had a classical violin teacher for a little while and I just couldn't seem to apply myself. I was terrible at it. And I was terrible almost on purpose, because I wasn't practicing, because I couldn't figure out why I should be practicing when there was no jam session to go to, you know, where's the dance at the end of the week? Where's the camp, the fiddle camp, you want to you know, there was no social aspect for me. I'm in that other realm. And so I didn't do it for very long, and I really didn't do it very well. So.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and you were fortunate to really come into contact and get to know some of like, the real pillars of the community. You know, Greg Boardman. He was one of the founders of Maine Fiddle Camp, which is where you and I got to know each other. And I mean, I probably knew you, but that's where I felt like I got to play tunes with you. And all the fun things that we would do there. And I just, it's just a wonderful, you know, Scrod Pudding and you know, Bill and Pam and Eric and everybody up there and just, it's, I love those people so much. They're so great. And such a wonderful community.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, Yeah, me too. Yeah, and that love of the people, it feels like it's this kind of warm globe of, of good feelings and support that includes the people and then it includes these musical aesthetics. And it even for me, it includes like, you know, it's a whole sensory experience. So I feel the love for my favorite people, and I feel the love for the music. And then I remember what it sounds like in the hall and the way it looks on a cold night when everybody's dancing and the condensation starts to freeze on the window pane and then that's all wrapped up with the smells and the sounds and everything. That's the whole body experience for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and doing it with friends is so important. You know, like bringing friends to the dance or just knowing you're gonna see friends there. Oh yeah, all of it together shared memories with all these different senses.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Mm hmm. Yeah, when I was a kid I was excited because at the time, all these college students from Bates and Bowdoin college were getting super into dancing. And so you know, as a young teenager, I just thought oh, well that's where the cool people go. And I I convinced a number of my high school friends that that was the case. We used to go and like think oh, yeah, we're gonna meet all these college guys at the time. I don't know that....I realize now that that was sort of a unique experience culturally in the 90s. But that was my experience. So.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you started learning from Greg, were you already a fiddler? Or was this the very beginning of you learning the fiddle?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, I'd been taking lessons for a couple years already. But it was more Suzuki-based. And Greg actually does some Suzuki-style learning with his students also, but I was with a different teacher for a couple of years. But I already knew I was super interested in fiddling. My mom actually is a huge folk fan and her best friend from college is a singer and fiddle player. And that actually, that's when I first started, it was actually a summer week when my mom's friend Carol was visiting us for a week in the summer, and she had her violin there, and we went and rented my very first fiddle, and she gave me my first lesson. And, you know, we had her CDs at home. So I was already listening to that music and getting excited about it. And we sought Greg out on purpose because we realized that that's what we were all interested in. We were excited about it. We wanted to know more of that.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you played for contra dances with Wake the Neighbors. At some point, Phantom Power was a thing.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yes, yep. Bruce and Sue Rosen are good friends. And when I I went to college in Boston, I went to the New England Conservatory. And then while I was there, got into the Boston contra dance scene and I met the Rosens through a mutual friend. Oh boy. It's all friends. A friend of friend of friend, right? I met Larry Jennings who was a mover and a shaker in the Boston dance scene. And I met him through David Kaynor because I was going to Boston for college, but I also knew I would need a car there because I was planning to gig on the weekends to support myself through school. And so I was trying to figure out a place to park my car. So David Kaynor introduced me to Larry Jennings specifically so I could do a trade with him. I parked my car at Larry's in Larry's driveway all through college in Newton, Massachusetts. And I did gardening work and I helped Larry you know, off and on with the shoveling and you know, yard work as he was getting older and his health was was failing. And then I got to have this car and I could go out and do dance gigging. I could come out to Western Mass for for dances and I could go up to Maine and play gigs. And so yeah, I was sort of interested in the Greater New England dance scene and then met the Rosens, Bruce and Sue Rosen through Larry, who was a mentor to Sue as she was learning how to call.And we just had a great time playing together. It was really fun. It's just fun and they were at a different, when we met up they were in their life progression. Their kids had just gone off to college and they were empty nesters for the first time and I think now I realized they were really excited. Get out and play gigs and kind of be, you know, adults, and get out and do their own thing and it was great for me just being in college in a new city, it was cool to go out and have a band to play with. And people that, you know, they're such great, they're deeply invested in the Boston dance scene, and so it was really fun to see and meet a bunch of people through them.

**Julie Vallimont**

I could only imagine. So that's fun adventures. Yeah, yeah. And we went out a bunch of tours together. It was cool. Was it mostly you and Bruce as a duo?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, I'm trying to think. My memory is that every time we toured, we always toured with Sue, and she was always our caller. I always considered her part of the band. Although she didn't play an instrument in our band. She always called. But yes, essentially Bruce and I as a duo, although we got hired occasionally for like a bigger dance weekend that would have a little bit more of a budget and they would ask us to bring a third person, and we went to Alaska once or twice and we brought a friend to augment the sound, and a couple of times we played the Dawn Dance we had a third and fourth person, I think we played with Mark Roberts once and maybe Stefan Amidon.

**Julie Vallimont**

Nice.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, I mean, it's fun. I love... duos are great. They're so flexible. You can you can upgrade or downsize. You know, you've got your core sound and then you can add on if that works.

**Julie Vallimont**

And of course, I'm especially fond of duos with pianos, just because the piano is such a rich, expressive instrument with such a huge range.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, yeah. Well and at the time when we started playing together, guitar was a lot more trendy. It was kind of like the fun, new, exciting backup instrument for dances and we kind of felt like we were holding it down a little more in the traditional realm, which was fun to do. I like to be oppositional. I don't know what that is about my personality, but I do enjoy doing the opposite of whatever I think people think I should be possibly doing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Bruce also, does he play a little guitar, or just uke?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, so he, after we'd been playing together for a little while, he did start adding in more guitar. I mean, he's a multi-instrumentalist. He's so good at everything from the start. He plays accordion, he plays guitar, he plays piano, but in our band, at the time, towards the later end of our playing together, he did add in the guitar for a few sets that we worked up together.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I love Bruce's piano playing. It's It's wonderful. It's fun. It's inventive. And it's still kind of grounded in that New England sound. As Arthur said, what is traditional? He's like, traditionalists of 30 or 40 years ago, maybe, but whatever that sound is, right. And your album, the Phantom Power album, was one of the ones that I learned how to play contra piano from.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

You're kidding me!

**Julie Vallimont**

No.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Are you serious? So cool!

**Julie Vallimont**

I took some lessons from people but you know, I already knew how to play the instrument. I've been a classical player for a long time also sucked at practicing, didn't enjoy it. Funny how I just really want to make music with people. And I got your album and I used to play along with all of Bruce's piano parts.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

That is so... Does he know that?

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't think I ever told him that, no.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

I kind of want to call him after this. Oh gosh, that is so sweet.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And I remember hearing you guys play back in....I think it was one of, maybe it was after Downeast. Maybe you were playing the Survivors' Dance. And I went to hear you play there. So great. Downeast Folk Festival in Maine.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, I used to love that, boy.

**Julie Vallimont**

So then how did you get involved in Scottish music?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, that story is kind of long too. But I won't bore you with all of it. Actually, it's once again thanks to Cindy Larock. The aforementioned mover and shaker in the folk and dance scene in Maine. When I was young, I think I was eight or something, she gave my family a LP of Alasdair Fraser and Paul Machlis. I think it was The Road North, and I just became a fanatic. We were basically stalking Alasdair all over New England. You know, we bought all of his records and then eventually later on CDs, and then we would go anytime he played anywhere, certainly in Maine, but you know, anywhere we could get to, Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, we'd go to the show or the workshop or the festival and my mom would record the whole set on on a cassette tape. And then I would go back and learn all of his tunes from his concert afterwards. And then we went to his I was, I don't know, I was 12 and my dad and my brother and I went to his fiddle camp in California, Valley of the Moon.

**Julie Vallimont**

 I've heard legends about that camp.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, well, that was a real musical awakening for me for sure. And after that, I went back as much as I could, as much as we could afford as a teenager and even through my 20s I just, I just love that camp so much.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that where your band Halali came from? Friendships there with Hanneke, Laura?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, yeah, I met met some very, very good friends there from even the first year first couple of years, that was when we were all going for the first time. And there weren't tons of kids then. And so we all kind of clumped together. And bonded very strongly and they're still, to this day, some of my dearest friends. That little core group that I met then, yeah, and Halali kind of came out of that with Hanneke and Laura, we all met at Valley of the Moon. And then we, it's just kind of coincidental. We all ended up in college in Boston. Laura and Hanneke both went to Berklee. And then I was a couple of blocks away at NEC and we had apartments around the corner from each other. And so we were playing a lot of music together. All of a sudden, like, like during high school, we would meet up once a year at Valley of the Moon and then maybe we'd go to a Scottish games and meet up a second time if we were lucky. And then we were pen pals throughout the year. And then once we got to college, we were all in the same city for the first time and it was super exciting, just tons of great music and jams and going out playing in different pubs and trying to sneak into pubs to see other bands play, and that was the fertile ground that Halali grew out of. Actually, I feel like it was Laura and I went to, I think we were juniors in college or something, and we went to Celtic Connections. In Glasgow.

**Julie Vallimont**

Amazing. Hello, dump truck!

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, Laura and I went to Celtic Connections, just for fun. And we had another friend in Glasgow that we knew from Valley of the Moon, who put us up in his flat. And then we met all of his friends and went to a ton of sessions and got to hear some great music and it was invigorating.

**Julie Vallimont**

What an experience!

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Inspiring! You know, we're sleeping on a friend's couch playing music every night and then hearing music every night and we came home, you know, basically ready for the second semester of music school. We just couldn't stop playing music and we incorporated Hanneke into our our enthusiasm. As you know, we did learn a bunch of new tunes and we'd written a bunch of tunes while we were there and had all these collaborations going on, and we just kept that momentum going and that's where Halali sprung out of.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. How did Flynn get involved?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, uh, was a friend of a friend. We were desperate for guitarists. Let's see, originally, Hanneke and I were doing a joint recital. We had the same violin teacher for a semester, even though she was at Berklee and I was at NEC. And we decided, you know, it's it's a lot of work to put on a conservatory recital. And so, you know, we figured, I don't know, we were juniors or sophomores or something. And we figured we'd do a joint, half and half recital and we'd collaborate on some things. And then we would showcase each other on other things. And we did the recital at Berklee, and then we did a recital in one of the halls at New England Conservatory. And then we were thought, well, we know all these people in the music community around New England, so let's take this on the road. Like probably my first like official tour, and we did a show Cindy Larock helped us set up a show in Lewiston, Maine at Bates College and we had, I don't know, one or two other little concerts, and we needed a guitarist. So we called a whole bunch of guitarists in Boston, we called Mark Simos, John McGann and I don't know Brian Hanlon at the time and Michael Carey, and nobody was available for our dates. And so finally, John McCann said, Oh, you know, there's this great new guitarist who just moved to Boston. He plays tours with John Whelan. You gotta go check him out. And so we we called Flynn and he was available, so he got the gig.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's this little serendipity moments. And now all these years later, you play with Flynn in Low Lily.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yep. Yeah, it's come around. That's how the music scene is sometimes you know, if you're still in the music scene, two decades later, you'll probably bump into each other a few times in between.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, man, I think of a lot of this is like the heyday of the Boston music scene. You know, there's a lot of good years when I was coming up as a dancer and as a relatively new trad musician. You know, I went to see you guys at festivals and I —

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Really?

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, yeah, totally. I remember seeing Halali, I was a groupie before you knew me. And, you know, I just tried to immerse myself in the Irish scene, in the Scottish scene just as an observer and and went to sessions at the Green Briar. I just love how there's the dance community in Boston, and then all these different trad communities, the way they overlap, they're not the same, and they don't always intermix, but yet there's this wonderful overlap between them.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, and honestly, it is actually, I guess, I'm not sure if this is still the case. But for a very long time, it was the only city in the US that you could really make a living as a folk musician, and center yourself in there in Boston, because there were so many different real paying gig opportunities. You could play sessions, you could play contra dances, you could play concerts, you could do teaching. Not to mention all the colleges, you could do, you know, lessons and teaching at any of the music schools. And so if you were a musician, like say Mark Simos or Matt Glaser or John McGann or...

**Julie Vallimont**

All professors at Berklee.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah and all people that decided for one reason or another, they didn't want to travel extensively, and they needed a home base to continue and a way to continue playing music. Without, you know, cramping their lifestyle in Boston is one of the few places you can do that. And that's the case now for a bunch of our peers, for sure that are making music their life in the Boston area.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And some of those folks have played for dances, like I played with Mark Simos for a dance once, he plays for dances once in a while. He's a busy guy, but I think he appreciates it and likes to bring students To learn how to play for contra dances, and get that experience, and I think I'm remembering this right but wasn't Matt Glaser in Fiddle Fever?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Oh, yeah. One of my favorite bands.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And there's, you know, Jay has a long history of running dance camps at Ashokan and with Molly Mason. And so there's this wonderful inner connection here that isn't always on the surface. So I would love to, thinking about all this, just to talk to you about your fiddle style a little bit. And what kind of things come from being a dance musician and what kind of things come from your Scottish playing or your classical background or anything else you picked up along the way?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, I can only guess. It's hard to have perspective when you are yourself. It's, it's also true that like, humans love to categorize things. And we love to, you know, to put things into genres into little boxes and stuff, but life is not really like that, you know, music is, is organic and fluid and the experience of music can flow and change. It's very fluid. So, you know, I can make some guesses, but really everything. I'm influenced by all of it. All the things I've done in heard and thought about and people that I've met and people I've played with, but for sure, you know, the Maine Country Dance Orchestra was a strong influence on my playing, as was the teachers at Valley of the Moon. And Alasdair Fraser and then, I'd say the third kind of major a hub of big influence would be you know, David Kaynor, and the Greenfield dance scene. And then there's all this stuff that I did in college, which was I did a lot of klezmer music and improvisation. And my, one of my favorite teachers Hankus Netsky had a huge influence on my playing and how I think about music and how I listen to music. Yeah, so I guess if I was to think about it myself, I might think of these overlapping circles of influence with Greg Boardman in the main dance scene, David Kaynor and the Greenfield dance scene, Alasdair Fraser and the Valley of the Moon, fiddle camp scene and then Hankus Netsky, and the college music avant garde improv scene, and all of those little things, you know, they're there, they rub up against each other. And overlap.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

But dance fiddling wise. I guess the dancers also have a huge influence on dance musicians playing and I'm sure I'm not excluded from that. A lot of the things you do as a dance musician you learn to do because you have a positive experience doing it while you're playing for a live dance. While the dancers are responding in one way or another, you make your choices based on those responses and those those choices become solidified more and more over time. So a lot of things like I tend to play with a pretty strong backbeat, and that is absolutely influenced by all of the hundreds and hundreds of dancers I've played for over all the years. Yeah, all those all those dancers, all those feet, all those sounds and all those halls those have influenced me a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, your playing, it's a wonderful combination, because it has this beautiful tone. I feel like Scottish fiddlers in general have this very wonderful tone. I don't know what it is about the technique.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, I agree, I love, I have a few favorite beautiful tone fiddlers that I just love, I can't stop listening to them. There are a lot of Scottish players for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you combine that with the rhythmic-ness. That's not a word, but the rhythmicity...also not a word.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

The groove?

**Julie Vallimont**

The groove of playing for dances and also, you know, Scottish music being rooted in dance music also has a very rhythmic feel to it. So it makes a lot of sense. Do you play differently when you're playing for a contra dance? Like how would you change the way you you play a tune? Or is it mostly you're playing different tunes and that brings out the difference in your fiddling.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

I am not necessarily playing different tunes, but I do change my style a little bit. Just kind of going from memory now because I haven't played for dance in a little while. But I think for a dance, when I think about playing for a dance, I think on a macro level, whereas when I'm playing for a concert, or a recording, I'm thinking on the micro level, and a lot of the details that go into the music are more densely packed with the assumption that the listener is going to be kind of paying attention in a more focused way in a kind of a clean and clear listening environment. And so, there's some, you know, real logistical things, like you don't play the tunes for as many times through, assuming that people are really carefully listening and they might be ready for something new sooner. But then also, there's, you know, I might do more subtle types of ornamentation or variations on the tune. Whereas on the macro level when you're playing for a dance tend to make much bigger gestures, and they take a lot longer. Because the dances go on for longer, you have more time, you can play more times through each tune, you can play more tunes and a medley. And some of the I just don't sweat the little stuff as much with a dance. You know, I don't agonize over the perfect medley of tunes, you know, I try a few things. I'm like, okay, that'll be great. And if it's not great, we won't do it again. But we'll just move on to the next dance. Move on to the next medley, move on to the next thing. And dancers are very forgiving, you know, they're having a great time. Like, worst case in artistic scenario. They're all still dancing and laughing with their friends. So even if I put together a kind of mediocre set of tunes for them, they're probably you know, not going to riot.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

You know, so we try to keep the focus on the big stuff, the really important stuff the groove, keeping the rhythm solid. And, and keeping the excitement up so that they feel so the dancers feel like that you're invested in their experience and then you get that back to goes both ways.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hmm. so much joy. Great. So when you say you tend to make a musical decision over a longer period of time, what kind of things are you changing about your playing?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, so dynamics are one thing that could change. And for a dance, it might take longer to change over time. I mean, like dramatic, dynamic gestures, not like the micro groove dynamics, but like, we might start, you know, really, really quiet and stay quiet for a whole time through the tune and then we might do a crescendo last at least once two or maybe more times through a tune, and then that crescendo could build into a textural change where once you're up and loud, you could add something in, maybe add in a new instrument or, or change tunes to kind of boost and lift or you could add in a more busy backup part. So you could use a long, long, dramatic dynamic change and then and then use that at a certain point to highlight a textural change and then that textural change might then influence the next dynamic idea you have or the next tune you want to go into. And I worry a lot less about smaller ornaments, you know, like, rolls or triplets or you know, all those fiddle ornaments and I and in a dance setting I rely much heavier on just steady groove and double stops to enhance, in the end, boost the sound.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a very David Kaynor kind of thing.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yep. And then I and then I think this is true for many, many, many, many dance musicians but I end up improvising a lot lot more. Because the tunes go on for a while and and like I said, the dancers are already having such a good time. They're already in their own experience with each other. And they are not listening to every tiny little mistake that you may or may not make on stage. And so it gives you this free rein to mess around a little bit. Yeah. And the pressures off so to speak. pressures dialed down, dial back. Yeah. And, and so a lot of, I'd be happy playing one tune for 10 or 15. 10 minutes and just messing around with it improvising. And I don't mean improvising like, like a jazz solo for 15 minutes, but like, subtle changes to the melody that could evolve over time, and maybe even morph into another tune that would also then keep evolving.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, cool. Do you ever write tunes on stage? I know some fiddlers do that. They'll just make up something

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

I have. I have a memory issue in that regard where I'm, I'm quite content to make up tunes, but I don't often remember what I've done.

**Julie Vallimont**

Me too.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

So that's a problem. I mean, like, I forget them. Usually, if I've made up an A part, and then I go on to make up a B part. I will definitely forget the A part by the next time it's supposed to come around. So like, unless I have a helper to tell me Oh, you played this, and I'll play it for you now. So I could relearn it. from them. I haven't really written any long lasting, memorable tunes on stage. Mm hmm. The ones that I end up playing a lot are the tunes that I've written in, like, a quiet moment when I have a recorder, a recording device, or a sheet of notepaper. So I can write it down and be like, Oh, yeah, that's what I did. That's the part.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely. It's like, you write an A part and then a B part. And then I come around to the A part. And I've already forgotten what the A part was.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Oh, for sure. And then sometimes when you're composing something you have all these decisions to make you know, do I like that? Do I not like that? Do I want to combine these ideas? Or do I want to get rid of that idea completely. And all of that thinking is inhibited when you can't remember any of these?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, when I'm writing tunes like that, I really have to take myself out of real time sometimes to do it, where I record it and then go back and listen back to the a part and then respond to the A part and record that. I have written a few tunes in like my backyard and things or or dances, written a few tunes during dances. But I only remember the simple ones.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. But that's, I mean, there's a lot of different ways to improvise during a dance. You know, there's like improvising within the melody or deconstructing the melody.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

And there's improvising out of the melody, like you're talking about, like a jazz solo or something.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Right? Like when you're improvising on a set of chord changes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And then there's all these textural things you can do and not play the melody at all.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

And then it's also possible to not do any of that stuff like, geez, Tractor Family, I don't know if you've heard them, but I love love, love their dance playing. Judy Hyman is this amazing fiddler and they don't really do a whole lot of variation. They just truck on and on and on. Awesome. Just deep groove and that's also very, very exciting.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of our listeners will probably know Judy Hyman from The Horseflies. Which has played... they're not really a dance band primarily, but they've played for contra dancing at the Flurry, at the Dance Flurry, and other places for years. And they're a groove. They're just a groove. You just go in and you groove to it, that's great. Such a deep groove.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

It's like a meditation. It's really amazing. I think I was on tour with Larry Unger. We did a bunch of tours. I don't know. We were probably driving somewhere really far really late at night, and he had like a bootleg cassette. I guess he's in the Tractor Family, which is why he had a live recording of them playing for a dance and it was just like, literally, the whole entire dance was recorded on a cassette and we listened to it for several days. And it was the best driving music. Like it was driving, but also literally, we were driving while we listened to it and it would get us so pumped. Get us to the next gig.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, Larry is another of those players who's just a rhythm machine. He just cranks it out.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, you really have to be.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it's a really great foundation for everything else that goes on top of it. I mean, he's also a melody player and a tunesmith. And you know, he has a vast variety of experience with all sorts of different kinds of music, styles and music. He has a huge instrument collection. But when he's just playing guitar, he is just a rhythm machine most of the time and I think less is more sometimes, you know, like that roll. Don't worry about all the other stuff and just crank out really good rhythm while you're there.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

That less is more idea is one of my favorite moments in workshops that I teach sometimes, where I'll be working with a group of fiddle players who are dance musicians and working on improvisation and we'll go through a bunch of exercises all these different ideas and things that we're working on and trying out different different things. And then we'll get to the point where I'll ask them to take stuff away. And that's always my favorite part in the workshop because it starts to sound so exciting. And it's an aha moment. So often.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, you know, like, everybody's working so hard in the workshop to come up with new stuff and to internalize these new ideas, and to really remember what you're talking about, what you've been doing together, and then you ask them to take stuff away. And it's like, the light bulb goes on there. Their mind clears and all of a sudden you hear the music. Super fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It's also about giving your brain permission for what you're doing to be enough. You know, I always have this feeling of should I be doing something more? Is this good enough? Like that little voice in my head?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Oh boy. This is now morphing into therapy session. [laughter] I could sure use this conversation.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, Lissa, what do the voices in your head say while you're playing music?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Or just you know, in life, boy, this maybe this is I guess this is a common American problem. But yeah, being, you know, being okay, with what is happening right now, this is enough. What you're doing is is enough. In fact, it's often more than enough.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And often a good tune is enough. I know you love a good tune. So I'd be curious to ask you. What are some of your favorite tunes to play for contra dancing?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Oh, boy. Sometimes it depends on the mood and the dance and the situation and the caller and the crowd. All those factors definitely influence my choices of tunes. And they also change my experience of the tunes. But there are some tried and true no matter what they always just make me happy. Huntsman's Chorus is one of them, never fails. It just, I love it so much. I actually learned that at Ashokan Northern Week with Jeremiah McLane because he thought I did know it. He, this happens a lot where Jeremiah will be like, Oh, yeah, you know, this tune, no problem, right. But he starts playing it and and then I think, well, that's a really great tune. I want to know that tune. And that's how I learned Huntsman's Chorus and boy, I just, I just don't think I'll ever stop playing it. It works so much of the time.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you ended up recording it on your album Dance.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, yep. Yeah, that was this whole exploration of tunes like that. That often are kind of magical one tune wonders, melodies that just sustain you and support the dancers and keep you interested over and over and over again that you just love. Yeah, so Huntsman's Chorus was kind of near the beginning of that journey for me, I heard that too. And I thought that is just magical. I'm going to play that for the next few months without stopping. And then I discovered there was a dance that went with it, and that was very magical. And then I thought, well, what else is there that's like this.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think that's one of the wonderful things that you do, is you you like see the magic and the beauty in some of these tunes. And you just naturally bring it out in your playing like Huntsman's Chorus could also objectively be kind of a dorky tune, although I love dorky tunes, it doesn't have to be beautiful per se. It can also be rousing and sprightly. Maybe? But on your Dance album, you're showing these tunes like, it's like they've gotten, I don't know, they're just a different, slightly different facet of them.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, so here's my my philosophy about a good tune. The thing for me, personally, that makes a really, really good tune is that it can wear many different costumes. It's super flexible, it can wear it can put on the dorky tune hat, or it can put on the elegant tune hat or it can put on you know, the boisterous tune hat, whatever. It's got all these different flexible personalities. It's like the friend you want to bring to any party. Like no matter who else is at the party, no matter what the theme of the party is, you want to bring this friend because they are the chameleon that will get along with everybody. That's how I feel about it. That's like my definition of a good tune. And yeah, and that's true Huntsman's Chorus could wear many hats. In a lot of those, the Dance album tunes I feel like I guess felt like I just wanted to show people a different costume on some common recognizable tunes that maybe people had an assumption about the tune or how it was supposed to be played or what makes that tune fun or not fun or whatever, or that dance exciting or not exciting, and I just thought, well, let's, let's put on some other costumes on these tunes and see how. See how that feels.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, your recording of Petronella is so beautiful.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Thanks.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, a lot of these tunes they, a good tune I feel like it's also sometimes naturally trancelike unless it's a rag or in that vein, where you're not going for that kind of feel. But enhancing that. You know. Bethany Waickman plays guitar, right?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yep, she was actually really the driving force behind that arrangement. I think it was one of the first things that we worked up together. as a duo when she was fresh out of college, and she had just moved to Boston, and I guess I wasn't living in Boston at the time, but I was going out to her place to work up some tunes and rehearse a little bit. And yeah, and I think I'd sent her a like a really terrible demo recording of me playing Petronella by myself just like solo fiddle like 10 times through, which I will do to collaborators on occasion. And so she had taken that kind of scratchy sounding recording and had put this guitar part underneath it that changed the whole feel completely. And it also, it changed it from a tune that was oriented around two beats or, you know, every measure and it became a tune that was oriented around much larger phrases where you were thinking about four measure phrases or whole A part phrases, because her harmonic motion changed on that level. And then that basically birthed the entire range of it really, well, that's the core of the arrangement. That's what we're going to build onto.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I feel like DADGAD guitar is especially well suited for that kind of thing.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, there's so much resonance in the tuning and so much that you can do moving against that resonance. I don't know. It just it seems to make people really want to move in slower harmonic progression. Because it is so glorious when you have a really resonant chord or instrument that's tuned with all these strings humming and buzzing all the time, you just want to keep them buzzing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. I mean, there's a long tradition of playing tunes over drones, you know, a lot of like Scottish music, a lot of other kinds of music. And I actually love that because then the moments of the melody make a harmonic tension over the tonic or the fifth, or whatever you're droning on. And so the tune has all these different inflection points.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 It's been one of the real traditional ways to experience Irish music, which was more almost all entirely melodically based before the 70s. Drone and melody. It's a good sound.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Yeah, I still love that sound.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 It kind of vibrates you physically, vibrates on an inner real gut level. There's like a physical experience of it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And those tones are not always about the chords. You know, it's about something else. It's like the melody has moments of tension and resolution in and of itself without needing cadences and chord progressions to do that for it.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

For me personally, I feel like it's a way to recognize and experience just sound waves rubbing up against each other, you know, where you're, when you're in an open tuning, you're usually working with perfect intervals and then and then a dissonance. So, like perfect intervals, when you see them as sound waves, they literally fit together in a very pleasing way and that like makes your eardrums feel something and then when you give you know when you do a second, a minor second or you know a dissonant interval against that, again, the sound waves like rub against each other kind of bump against each other and they don't fit perfectly in your ears, you can feel it. You feel the vibrations in your head. It's super cool.

**Julie Vallimont**

Super cool.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Joni Mitchell used to call those, well, she has this word chords of inquiry.

**Julie Vallimont**

Chords of inquiry.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 When she was doing, a lot of her guitar tunings are open and then she would do a dissonant thing, a moment of dissonance and she'd call that a chord of inquiry right where it catches your ear and then you're waiting for the next statement, musically speaking.

**Julie Vallimont**

Joni Mitchell's guitar tunings, that's a whole other, we could talk about that for an hour.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, see, honestly, I really think that is, in some ways full circle, like I know that Joni's guitar playing was a huge influence on some of the earlier Irish guitar backers in the traditional music scene. I remember talking to Dáithí [Sproule] about that and some of the albums that he made like really, really early on when guitar was not typical in Irish trad music and then fast forward to like the the contra dance scene in New England in like the 80s and 90s when all of those Irish trad albums were a huge influence on the musicians here. And thinking now about sort of either DADGAD guitar style or that open piano style where you have a droning tone in the left hand and then you move the chords against it with the right hand like it just, it feels like a big circle from Joni Mitchell. Around through all these different genres. I don't know that it's gonna go back to Joni but it's maybe more of a spiral than a circle necessarily.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. But things influence each other in interesting ways, you know. And yeah that droney piano style is something that is now kind of a classic part of the New England piano sound. I've heard Bruce Rosen do it, Mary Cay Brass, who I learned a lot from, would do it quite a lot. You know, and she was also influenced by DADGAD guitarists.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, she talks about that a lot. You should get Mary Cay on.

**Julie Vallimont**

 I'd like to.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 She's got some cool things to say about how she developed her piano style and who she was listening to. And it is sort of an opposite sound to the older piano style, which we like to call boom chick.

**Julie Vallimont**

What people might think of as Bob McQuillen's playing, or if you think about the sound of the New England Chestnuts albums and Rodney Miller's playing on that album.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Which is more like, boom chick like, left hand, right hand, left, right, left, right, as opposed to, you know, something droning in the left while something changes in the right.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Do you like playing to the more boom chick style?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 I like it all.

**Julie Vallimont**

It changes the groove, I find.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yep. Sometimes it changes the tunes I choose too.

**Julie Vallimont**

 I feel like there's some New England tunes that don't fit very well for droney style. They have sort of built in chord changes and they just want to be boom chicked under. And even like on the Dance album, I forgot, Arthur Davis and I were talking about the tune Mountain Ranger. When I went to re-listen to Dance, I forgot that it's on your album.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

I love that tune so much. That Dance album was well influenced by lots of things, but that that medley, I got Mountain Ranger. I just learnt it out of the New England Fiddler's repertoire book, which was, you know, put together by Randy Miller. And I learned a whole bunch of tunes out of there and I don't normally learn tunes from the sheet music that's pretty unusual for me. Which is, I guess, maybe just a sign of what a great tune book that is. So that book helped me put together a number of sets for the Dance album.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's wonderful, though. I mean, like we say, it's a really magical thing to be able to learn a tune from someone and learn their inflection, how they play it and kind of pass that down. But also, there's a lot of tunes that kind of get accidentally forgotten and tune books are really great ways to remind us of them.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, what a great tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Also, you have Rory O'More on your album, which we've heard at the beginning of this podcast. Your treatment of that was a little unusual.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Ah, what was that? I composed this whole middle section, sort of a through composed..... I was working really hard to create a triumph of the human spirit feeling. You know, and I thought, well, this tune could be like we were saying before, it could wear different hats. It could be super dorky. It could be boom chicky could be many, many things. But then it's got this minor major shift. Like, the A part is pretty, it's A major, right? And then the B part could go in many directions. And I thought, well, what if we just play with the minor vibe for a long time and we just keep that going for a really long time and that kind of then prompted me to come up with this whole other, basically, very long tune in the middle that is a kind of a palate cleanser.To the Rory O'More that then happens afterwards which is more major, major key five. And I was sort of copying some other friends of mine at the time that were making instrumental music and other genres. You know, like Hanneke Cassel or some of Alasdair Fraser's older albums and thinking about ways to bring the listener on a journey, whether they're sitting down listening to a CD in the quiet of their own home or they're in a dance hall, like you kind of emotionally when you're listening to music, you want to feel like you're going somewhere. And so that was one of the compositional tactics I employed to go somewhere with all of the listeners together.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that's definitely something you'd hear in any modern contra dances where there's more arrangements and the arc has a feeling of going somewhere. And I think modern dancers really like that feeling.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well, I mean, it's just storytelling, right? You read an epic novel, and you really want to feel like there's this theme where the main character goes off on a journey, on an adventure, and then all these things happen that change their view, and they have, you know, new thoughts and new experiences, and then they come back home again, but they're changed and so like, you can kind of do that instrumentally as well.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like every contra dance is just The Lord of the Rings.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Right, we're in The Odyssey, 16 bars at a time, 32 bar set.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and just because I'm piano-centric, and I don't mind making this podcast piano-centric. This is a sidebar. You know, you've mentioned The Road North a couple times, but that is a watershed album for a lot of people who discovered that music, Alasdair's music, Scottish music and also for piano players like for me, as a piano player that was a watershed album.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Paul Machlis? I love him so much that I literally have some of his solos memorized.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I think I went through and I memorized all the piano parts of that entire album.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

We should, can we play that album? I'll play the fiddle parts.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that'd be so great.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

My brother and I used to do that when we were kids actually. And he would play the piano part and I play the fiddle part. And then eventually my mom made us stop playing together because we had too many fights over what was actually supposed to be happening on The Road North. It's literally one of the most major sources of family strife as a child.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a great story that just tells a lot about your family, your childhood.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, my brother doesn't really play music very much anymore but if we do play together, the thing that we both still remember, almost in its entirety is The Road North.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know at BCMFest, the Boston Celtic Music Festival, didn't Flynn Cohen and Matt Heaton and other folks always put together some album concert every year where they would play a whole album?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Oh boy. They did, one of my favorite ones they did was, well they did the Paul Brady, Andy Irvine duo so well. That's all those classic old traditional Irish songs. I actually have a Paul Machlis story. I was on tour with Phantom Power, with Bruce and Sue in California. We were doing one or two weeks of contra dances all up and down the West Coast. And I can't remember where we were, it might have been Santa Barbara or something, I forget where Paul Machlis lives, maybe Santa Cruz area, anyway, we were playing a gig, we're just in the middle of it playing tunes and calling dances and then Paul Machlis shows up and he came right up to the stage and said, "Wow you guys sound so great!" and I said "you're Paul Machlis!" I almost peed my pants I was so excited. And then I was so terrified for the rest of the gig. I was like, well wait, how many tunes from The Road North are in our setlist tonight, you know, like maybe we should change it, like, I don't want to be like such a dork. You know, I don't really want to, but I mean, I told him he was like being very kind and complimentary and telling us how much he was enjoying the music that night. And I mean, I told him I was a huge fan and I loved his playing and he was very humble and sweet. But that whole night, I was so nervous, more nervous than I've ever been for any dance ever, just thinking, oh, he heard that note. Oh, let's see, oh, he heard that note too. I'm sure he was not concerned in the slightest.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm sure he loved the whole thing.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 And since then he's actually come out to a few gigs. But he's always very kind, but I've had to work on my nerves. In front of my heroes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely. I find even interviewing my heroes I get a little tongue tied.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

I should start a podcast, now that would be fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

I would listen to any podcast you make, Lissa.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 Interview all my heroes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Seriously, I would totally listen to that.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

We'll see. We'll see. I have a few other brainstorms I need to see through first

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, your other irons in the fire. I remember, and tell me more about this, but I remember hearing that you used to go to the Ralph Page archives and do research up there.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah, it's funny, I was actually just thinking about that, because I have an old old computer and it's full and every day, it gives me this error message that says you do not have enough room on your computer. There's not enough disk space or whatever, for whatever thing I'm trying to do. And so I was actually going through a folder I had called Listening. And I'd made a bunch of Word documents, as I was listening to all these different archived recordings. And I just opened them up yesterday to say, do I need to save these? And then I actually decided, yes, I really do. I need to save these documents. And so actually, I went to the Ralph Page library at UNH and I also went to a few other places. I went to hear some private record collections. Frank Ferrel is a great fiddler up in Maine who has an unbelievable audio collection of maritime fiddles fiddling. I have never seen such an amazing room full of records, tapes and CDs and Peter Yarensky also played me a bunch. He's got a very extensive collection of tapes and LPs, and then Ralph Page library at UNH, which is just an amazing resource. And then there's also a folk archives up at USM, no, no sorry, not USM, University of Maine in Orono has a folk archives that was started by a ethnomusicologist named Sandy Ives, who was a professor there. And yeah, just wow, you know, you could spend years and years listening to all the amazing music that has been collected. And it gave me an opportunity to hear a lot of older style dance musicians and also ballad singers, and also to hear interviews from those people. And yeah, it was really interesting. I kind of got into it, sort of because because I was teaching and I was teaching a lot of workshops and private lessons and people would ask me to teach them about the New England fiddle style. And I certainly had lots of ideas from playing gigs and playing contra dances and playing with all of my heroes and mentors, but then I thought, well, if I'm really going to be some kind of authority, I better do my homework. It felt irresponsible not to so yeah, I did a lot of listening to older style dance bands. And that was a huge, huge part of the Dance album also that I ended up making.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's a lot of classic New England tunes on there.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah. And I was curious, you know, we have these ideas. From one decade to the next you have an idea about what is modern? What does that word mean to us right now in this context, and then you have an idea each decade about what is traditional and and the truth is that those meanings, the definitions of those words change over time. And so I just was kind of like, well, I think I know what a traditional fiddler sounds like. But let's actually go see. Let's go hear it. Let's see how far back I can find a recording. And anyway, there's all kinds of cool things out there to discover.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who are some of the bands that you were listening to?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Let's see if I can remember. Well, I did a bunch of, you know, there's a bunch of Ralph Page stuff.

**Julie Vallimont**

The Ralph Page Orchestra?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 Ralph Page was a music collector. Actually the UNH folk archives was started because Ralph Page donated his entire library to the university and then they had to put it somewhere. And that was kind of the seed that started and now many people have since then have donated more recordings. But Ralph Page had a huge record collection of all different kinds of music. Plus, he also published a ton of music. The Ralph Page Orchestra was well recorded, and he was selling his records to people that wanted to be able to dance at home, you know, he couldn't be everywhere at one time. So he would record the band and the calls and you could just put the record on and have a little neighborhood dance. And so he had a bunch of those that he was selling and then he also was recording live music at different events, like had all these different old recordings of stuff that he just collected. So that that was all kinds of cool stuff. I also really enjoyed hearing some of the early 80s dance bands. Like all of the musicians that I had met and played music with, but it was really exciting to hear them in their younger days playing with different people. I heard a lot of you know Bob McQuillen. I got to hear a lot of like Bob McQuillen and Dudley Laufman, all the Canterbury Dance Orchestra stuff when it was first starting. Which was interesting to me because I felt like I had a personal connection to it and I wanted to be a fly on the wall, so to speak before I was actually in the scene. So that was fun. And then there's a ton of other stuff that I can't remember everybody's name, like, just random recordings from dances and in people's kitchens from all around New England. Just everybody was making music at one time and it felt like you get to hear these little pockets of a captured moment. Sort of a captured moment from that time before radio and then eventually TV kind of took over. And when you might be out in a rural New England community and the dance was still THE happening thing. There were some communities I just find this still blows my mind there was some communities like in New England, rural New Hampshire where there were dances happening six nights a week in the middle of nowhere and they were packed, you know, like you could have a, you know, you would never even have to go on tour if you were the dance band in that town. You just play every night and people show up and dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

 It's the thing to do. Yeah, not a lot else to do.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Anyway, it's interesting to think about what that was like.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, there's a lot of recordings that are just on these old vinyl records. And, you know, some folks have digitized them and there's just a lot of history out there waiting. You know, Ralph Page of course, was a big figure in the Boston dance scene for many years and you know, so many people came through and played in his orchestra and just really interesting stuff.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

I'd say one of my favorite little gems from that whole time that I was exploring and listening to older recordings to this day like if I had found nothing else it was worth it because I found this recording of Duke Miller calling Money Musk to live band, it was in a hall, you can hear the the sound of the dancers and he sings it, which, you know, I'd heard Kate Barnes do at gigs, but it was always like kind of a joke-ish nostalgia thing for Kate, who was remembering, like Kate's early beginnings of dance band playing and dancing and dancing to like Ralph Page and Duke Miller and all these older style callers that would sing the calls to these classic dances and I just love this recording. It's so beautiful, Duke Miller is this New Hampshire caller. And yeah, it's really very cool sounding.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's so great. I love that you've taken the time as a fiddler and just as a human, as a musician to kind of delve into this history a little bit. I mean, the Ralph Page archives are there, anyone's welcome to go.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 I don't know what their pandemic protocol is but there's just so, and honestly, they, the libraries are there for people, they love people to come and to enjoy them and to listen and get excited about music. All these different places.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and then there's the Ralph Page Dance Weekend. Have you been to that? You played at that weekend, I'm sure.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

I've played there a few times, at least once with Bruce and Sue. Maybe some other bands. I don't remember.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love that weekend.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

That's actually the first time I got to hear your music, that I remember dancing to and just being super blown away.

**Julie Vallimont**

Talk about coming full circle.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

I remember being there and dancing and being like, oh, oh.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Was I playing there with Nor'easter, probably?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

I think so.

**Julie Vallimont**

That was a great year. I mean, I was blown away by that weekend the first year I went before playing there you know, I just went as a dancer. And it was a transformational experience for me as a dancer. Because I got there and I didn't know a lot of people. I was meeting people in the community, but I didn't know everyone yet. And I was like, oh, this is a more mellow crowd. Like coming from Boston dancing at the VFW where I used to dance like a more high energy style of dancing. I come there and I'm like, oh, am I gonna be bored here? And then after 10 minutes, I was like, oh, actually, this is pretty great. And then about half an hour in, I just had this kind of transcendent realization where I was like, oh my goodness, the whole hall is dancing together, we're all moving together. And instead of everyone being really focused on their flourishes, everyone was just doing the choreography together and my partner would guide me in the right direction for a hey, instead of spinning me out into left field.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Into the wall.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Yeah, exactly. And I felt like supported and connected and the music, in general is amazing. You know, they get a lot of the best musicians from New England to play there. And I think Airdance was playing or, you know, one of Rodney's bands or something. Maybe you were playing and it was just, it was just great. It really changed for me my perception of what contra dancing can be and so I highly recommend that everyone go and that's where you can meet a lot of these folks who know some of this like older history of like New England, contra dancing, especially the New Hampshire and Massachusetts roots of it. A lot of these folks are there and you can just sit in the hallways and talk to them. That was when I first worked up, worked up the nerve to say hi to Bob McQuillen. Kind of a terrifying experience. I went up to him and I, he was so sort of half asleep in the chair, which he often was and because he was quite old at this point, and I said, excuse me, sir, which of course, anyone who knows him knows how ludicrous this whole scenario is. Like, excuse me, sir. Like, do you teach piano lessons? And he's like piano lessons! No, get out of here. I don't teach no lessons. I was like okay, okay. So, I left. And then someone else is like, no, he's joking with you. You got to ask him again. And I went back he was so friendly and he gave me his card and you know, Peter Yarensky is always there and Peter, like you're saying, has a lot of stories, he loves these classic New England tunes and has a lot of stories about them.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Well and he's done, yeah, he's got a lot of archives written down, just like transcribed in great detail, a lot of this old music. It's cool. Yeah, boy, that Bob.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, he used to teach at Maine Fiddle Camp for years. You must have some good stories.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Oh, geez. Yeah, actually, you know, it's funny. So you know, it's funny because he lived in New Hampshire and I grew up in Maine, and, but oddly enough, the first place we met was in Washington State, no, met in Idaho. We were both hired to play at the Lady of the Lake Dance Week. Maybe Larry Unger was there also, somehow I got into this band with Bob McQuillen. And we met for the very first time there at the beginning of the week and he .....Yeah, I can only imagine how he would have responded when you when you said, "Excuse me, sir." His favorite greeting was "How the hell are ya?"

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

And he liked very much to use foul language whenever possible. But fun guy, really fun. And then once we met out there, then we had this connection, musical connection and we got to play a bunch more dances in New England together also.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's wonderful.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

You know, I was just thinking about sort of talking about the archives, the Ralph Page Archives, and then a few of the other libraries. And the one thing that I've been thinking about now in retrospect is that there is, at least in the library archives that I've gone to, there is an absence of mention of like Indigenous and Black American musicians in the scene, which is odd. And it's worthwhile to say that because I think for anybody that's listening is thinking about going to these places, I guess it's important to consider that you know, that we're not all just white people in this little bubble, even though it has felt like that for a long time. And I actually regret not asking more questions about that when I was in research mode. And you know, asking specifically for other types of music and other musicians that weren't represented in my research and there's an opportunity there for people that want to do more research now, which is kind of exciting, you know, to ask those important questions about all of the different people that have making been making music in New England over the past few hundred years, so that's something that I'm contemplating and thinking about a lot now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thank you so much for bringing that up. I think that's really important to consider. I mean, history is a funny thing, right? It totally depends on who tells it and what we choose to save and who we acknowledge and who feels welcome participating in something.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

And even, you know, who's doing the collecting. So, you know, Ralph Page started, essentially started the Ralph Page Library at UNH, and he was a white man and Sandy Ives essentially started the folk archives at the University of Maine in Orono and he was also a white man. So, so that's, you know, just to say, take it all with a grain of salt.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right. It is some of our history, but it's definitely not the definitive history and it's easy to forget that. There's a lot of untold parts of things.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Hey, I also, you know, not to abruptly change gears, but also to abruptly change gears slightly. Speaking of my Dance album, I wanted to tell everybody who's been listening to these podcasts that I have two sort of secret, unreleased tracks that I recorded back when I recorded Dance and I'm actually giving them away for free right now for anybody who wants to sign up for my mailing list on my website.

If you go to lissafiddle.com [spells it out], there's a place to sign up for my mailing list and anybody that does gets these two free mp3 downloads with two more classic dance tracks. I think one starts with Haste to the Wedding, a classic dance and jig and then the other one is Hull's Victory which I love. So I just love that tune and it broke my heart not to include them on the Dance album. It really was just too long. You know, like, too much cake can make you sick. I didn't want to make anybody sick. I really wanted them to appreciate this beautiful music. So anyway, I have these these free tracks floating around. They're just kind of special bonus tracks for anybody that's curious.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's wonderful. Thank you for sharing those with us and thank you for all your amazing playing and the joy that you bring to the dance floor.

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

Yeah. It's fun to talk about all the dances and dance music with you.

**Julie Vallimont**

So, anything else you'd like to talk about today?

**Lissa Schneckenburger**

 Well now I'm craving cake but I don't think that's what you meant. I can't think of anything I mean, I'm just appreciating this podcast and also your other podcasts that you have been putting together and just appreciating the work you've been you've been doing as an artist and a musician and an appreciator of the arts.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, thank you so much for your time and energy and stories Lissa, I really appreciate you being here today. Yeah, thanks for having me. Take care.

**Transcript may be edited for clarity. Apologies for any typos. Thanks to Ellen Royalty and Margaret Youngberg for their help in preparing this transcript.**