Contra Pulse Episode 11 – Noah VanNorstrand Part 1

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello, and welcome to Contra Pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This week we talk with Noah VanNorstrand. Noah's driving fiddle, feet, and mandolin have been a rhythmic powerhouse behind some of the most popular dance bands of the last decade, including Great Bear, Buddy System, Wake Up Robin and the Faux Paws. He has performed all over North America at nearly 200 different dance weekends, folk festivals and music camps. His musicianship is deeply compelling and virtuosic, but difficult to define, freely blending traditional folk genres such as Celtic and old time Appalachian fiddling with elements of rock, new grass, and pure unfiltered improvisation. Noah's unique approach to foot percussion and innate understanding of dynamics and groove have made him a defining figure of modern contra dance music. He often works with his older brother Andrew VanNorstrand, and together they manage their own independent label - Great Bear Records, which has released over a dozen albums. Noah is also a prolific composer and many of his tunes can be found in the recently published music book Long Flight Home - Original Tunes by Andrew and Noah VanNorstrand. Whether he's leading a full band or completely solo and unaccompanied. Noah's music is always inspired, honest, and irresistibly danceable. We had so much fun talking that this week is another double episode. In the first half, we talk about how Noah got started playing for contra dances, his influences, growing up in a family band and creating his own style of music alongside his brother Andrew, his creative process, and tune writing. He even plays a couple fiddle tunes and demonstrates some foot percussion.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello, Noah VanNorstand.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Hello, Julie.

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Thank you. It's very nice to be here.

**Julie Vallimont**

I am really glad to have you here.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

We're so close.

**Julie Vallimont**

We are so close. For all our listeners, this is a really special treat. First of all, we're inside a building. Noah quarantined for two weeks to visit me and drove all the way up from Asheville very safely. And so he's actually in my house, no masks, so any slurring is just us. And he actually has a fiddle here. I've been too far away from people to do much music, you know, recording but maybe he'll play a little fiddle in this episode, so don't be startled if you hear fiddle out of nowhere.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I know how to do that, I can do that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, welcome, I did leave the door open so that people can still imagine the sounds of buses and trucks going by on the porch and hear the wind blow from time to time just to complete the ambience.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

You gotta keep your episodes sounding, you got to keep them sounding the same so people don't get confused.

**Julie Vallimont**

This is the professional level of soundscape that people have come to expect at Contra Pulse. Oh, the weather report, I've been also giving a weather report at the beginning of every episode. It's a beautiful late summer day. I don't know, high 70s not too humid, nice breeze, sunny.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I wore my flannel this morning and it was magically wonderful.

**Julie Vallimont**

That truck was still really loud and we're inside. Yeah, I'm glad you could wear a flannel.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

It felt really great. Put it on, feel cuddly.

**Julie Vallimont**

You love flannel.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I love flannels.

**Julie Vallimont**

We love flannel season. So we're just gonna talk and this is a different kind of conversation because you know, of course you and I are bandmates.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

This is already, I think, as formal as we've ever been with each other. Thanks so much for having me, Julie. You're buddy, you're not Julie. Buddy! Hi, buddy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hi, buddy. So we are in the band Buddy System, you can figure out where the name comes from. So I'm gonna be asking you questions that I already know the answers to.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Whew, good.

**Julie Vallimont**

So if you don't remember them, I'll answer them for you. So can you tell us all like how you got started playing for dances?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yes. I think I can do that. Okay, I think I can handle I can handle that one. So, me and my brother Andrew VanNorstrand with our our mom Kim, we started playing for contra dances in the year 2000. I think I was like, 10 and Andrew was 12-ish and Andrew and mom went to Jay Ungar and Molly Mason's Ashokan camp, Ashokan Fiddle Camp. And they just fell in love with it. And they came back. I was too young to go the first year. So they came back. And they fell in love with it, were talking all about it, and then the next year, we all went as the three of us and then after that, we started playing for contra dances. Pretty much right right away. And we were terrible. Can you say "sucked" on this podcast?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It's okay.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

We sucked. Anyway, I'm pretty sure we did.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, 12 year old, 10 year old and your mom who was a good classical pianist.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

But never had played folk music before.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Do you have early recordings from those days?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Not those days. Nope. I played almost entirely... I played almost entirely hand percussion on the, like, the first three, four years of Great Bear. I played like, hand drums and shaker. I tried to play fiddle but l don't think, I must not have been, I thought I was good enough because I would get annoyed at Andrew and mom when they wouldn't let me, but I must not have been.

**Julie Vallimont**

So this is kind of an inspiration to anyone who's learning a new instrument because at one point you were not good enough to play fiddle in Great Bear and look how you turned out. Turned out all right. Turns out that thousands of hours doing something will just kind of end up in you being good at it.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, well, hm.

**Julie Vallimont**

I know it wasn't all the practice. [laughing]

**Noah VanNorstrand**

We started playing for contra dances like right away and and then kept on going to Ashokan, and Ashokan was kind of where we are once a year, did all of our learning. Andrew and I would like do all of our learning at Ashokan and then teach ourselves for the rest of the year, pretty much. I'm more self-taught than Andrew was, Andrew took some lessons, but I just copied Andrew and everything.

**Julie Vallimont**

So a younger brother looking up to him. And you were homeschooled. Right?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

So, yes, that's important to point out. Yes, we were home schooled.

**Julie Vallimont**

So that you had time to do these things during the day. So what were some of the classes you took at a Ashokan?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I would take Sue, get this right, Sue Conger would teach, she taught Contra Fiddle 1. So like for the first four or five years of Ashokan I would go to her class. I always liked that class because I could pick up the tunes real fast and then it made me feel like all good, good about myself, confident and all that good stuff. I liked that. And then later on Rodney Miller was the person like, Airdance was the band at Ashokan for many years in those mid 2000s and so he was always there. And those are two of the main fiddlers at Ashokan. Those are the main classes I would take. And then it was also because we were homeschooled Ashokan was also like, like my highest social outlet was like ooh, social time, Ashokan, friends. Crazy concept.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of kids your age.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Making friends, having crushes, yeah, good stuff.

**Julie Vallimont**

And also like speaking of fiddlers, like Jay Unger was obviously playing a lot of fiddle, and David Kaynor was there.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yep. I forgot those. Yeah, 'cause they're all, they're there every single year, they're still, always, always there. Yes, they're always there and a huge, huge influence on those early years, and now.

**Julie Vallimont**

So what were your first contra band gigs?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

First ones, so we were in Fulton, New York, which is like a teeny little city outside of Syracuse. We're in the Syracuse, New York area. And Syracuse has a wonderful dance community. As we traveled around more and more throughout the years, you got to like, see a lot of dance communities, and then Syracuse was always really, really, really good at being welcoming, like really good at being welcoming to everybody in a healthy way, and it was a small community, but sometimes the small communities are the best at being welcoming. So it's a great little community. So yeah, that was the Syracuse contra community. They were the ones that had to listen to us when we sucked.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm sure they were gracious and supportive. I mean, you guys were cute and I feel like cute goes a long way.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Oh man that must've helped, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

So it was Andrew on fiddle, your mom on piano, and you on hand percussion.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Pretty much. Yep. There there would be like one or two sets that I could play fiddle with Andrew. But that was that was the thing and then in 2003 we made our first CD. And that felt like a big deal at the time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's three years into doing all this. It's not that long. You were 13.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yep, 13 and then that kind of kicked off a new thing because we we recorded a CD every single year for like, well, three years, I guess we recorded a CD in 2013 and 2014 and 2015. And then took a year break, so it wasn't every year but then we just started making a lot of CDs through high school age. And that was a very different way of approaching music than just for a dance. Andrew and I start to think about music with arrangements, and yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, play with textures and drama.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Somewhere somewhere between 2003 and 2004 is when I learned how to play fiddle.

**Julie Vallimont**

After your first album and before your second album.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Because by the second album I was mostly playing fiddle on Driftage. That was our second album and the first one I ever played fiddle on like two tracks on the first one, but the second one is like all fiddle. So somewhere in there I must have gotten good enough or maybe it was just that Andrew wanted to play guitar and I wasn't gonna learn how to play guitar so ......

**Julie Vallimont**

Someone had to play fiddle.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Someone had to play fiddle, someone had to play guitar.

**Julie Vallimont**

Driftage is a great album. It's amazing that that was your second album.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

It has had staying power. I'm surprised at still hearing people like find it, find the CD now, like, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

It has some good tunes on it, good team playing, fun arrangements. So when you were kind of learning, "learning" how to play fiddle what was the main way you learned, was it playing along with Andrew? I doubt you were alone practicing very much.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I wasn't alone practicing. No.

**Julie Vallimont**

Were you playing along with recordings?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Nope, didn't do that. So Andrew and I would just, we were "homeschooled" but really all we did was play music. When I think back, like we would all day, every day for like, that was like high school age years, we would just play music all the time. So I think I'm pretty sure the the learning how to play fiddle just came from just constantly playing music with Andrew. I remember, I would write tunes and then my tunes that I would write, were, they like, there weren't chords for them, they're like too weird to have chords, they weren't in a scale. I didn't understand what a scale was. So it's just like... and then I would get really, really mad and frustrated at Andrew when he wouldn't play chords to my tune. He wanted to change it, don't change my tune! And then he's like, there aren't any chords to your tune though. I don't want to hear it. This is my tune, you can't change my tune. Those are the arguments that we had as sibllings. Mom! He was trying to change my tune again so it fits within music!

**Julie Vallimont**

Within music. [laughing] Your mom probably didn't intervene too much, did she?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

No, she kinda let that happen. And it never got actually ugly.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you know since then you've had many bands, I mean we're talking about Great Bear you'd had like almost 20 years of Great Bear before it finally went into hibernation as you say, with the old bear joke. You know, you've had many other bands over the years, you had Andrew and Noah bands where you're doing more songs and tunes and textures and up to like a six piece band.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Folk-rock band. Yeah, we tried to do that thing for a while.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah but for contras you had Great Bear, then Great Bear became a larger band, the six piece version of Great Bear.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, well you want to know the timeline?

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm not trying to go in order necessarily. I'm just trying to give our listeners a sense. But we can we can go back in time, I just realized if we talk about all of your beginnings, we won't have time for any of the now, because you have a long history.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

What was that saying? There's like your age. Like how long you've been born.

**Julie Vallimont**

And how old are you in contra years?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Contra age. And when Buddy System started, at least I was an old man. And Julie was the angsty teenager or something. I don't know.

**Julie Vallimont**

When Buddy System started I was eight years old in contra years.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Eight years old in contra years, and I wasn't an old man, I was like 20 years old.

**Julie Vallimont**

You were 20 years old in contra years so you had 12 more years of contra playing under your belt than me. Yeah, I know I thought of that phrase "contra years" because people would say, we're doing this thing for young callers, or young musicians and I was like, well, maybe we can be less ageist about it, like isn't actually the age of the people or is that we want them to be new. Because I felt old in people years, well, not old, but older. I wasn't like a young'un, but I was new. I wasn't eight. But I was new and contra years and so I wanted to be considered new and not old. And you know, seeing you know, there are some new callers who were in their 50s or 60s and they're also new. Anyway, we digress. I want to double back just really quick to your mom, Kim Yerton, she's a great piano player.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Mama Bear, that's what she likes to be called.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I feel like it's okay to talk about her for a second because I did ask her if she wanted to be interviewed, but she said she is too shy for such a thing and she was very honored by the request but can't stand the thought of talking about herself into a microphone for this long. So I might just talk about her playing through you.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, that might work.

**Julie Vallimont**

She is a piano player, obviously, like played a lot of like, kind of boom chuck style piano. A lot of it she made up herself, but do you know who her early influences were?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I'm trying to think who was at Ashokan? So definitely Rachel from...

**Julie Vallimont**

Rachel Aucoin from Tidal Wave?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

From Tidal Wave.

**Julie Vallimont**

And other projects, Domino.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Domino was the band at Ashokan back then.

**Julie Vallimont**

With Richard Forest and Sabin Jacques.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, so Rachel was was definitely there, that was always, that was like her highlight of a teacher at Ashokan. I'm trying to remember who taught, because she has a story. I'm not gonna remember who it was but she has a story of like the first, when Andrew just decided randomly he wanted to play fiddle, not violin, fiddle. He kind of just like, out of the blue decided that when he was eight, and mom was like, okay, I don't know what to do with that. Someone showed her just like the the boom chuck of like, just just play this note on the bass and then just play the chord and then just go back and forth until like put her hands on the piano to do that and she says how weird that felt for a very long time. But I guess as far as a person I think Rachel would be a person she respected and learned the most from.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember one of my favorite things about Great Bear when I first heard of you guys, and just always is that it's a very piano-centric band. And you know what the piano can do as an instrument and you know, your mom is a wonderful musician and a classically trained musician but this whole improvising in the folk realm was very new for her. So you guys would write her parts and teach them to her and she would play them.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah. In Great Bear Mom was a piano player. Like all of her piano parts she learned from a guitar player. Andrew, you know, did a lot of that arranging. And so that did make for some unique piano parts. I think.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then, you know, all of Great Bear's, I was gonna say, histrionics. That's a bit of a strong word, but... we'll say drama. She's doing all these crazy five chords and drones and her right hand is doing tinkly things up high and builds and....

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I remember those those early, like, rehearsals that we would have with Great Bear when Andrew would be like, coming up with and teaching, teaching those parts and seeing if there were even like piano-able parts. And it took hours. It was like a long time to to get that all right, because they were complicated. Andrew had lots of ideas that he wanted her to know.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, some of them are really technically difficult. Like arpeggios like [sings], all like, both hands and octaves, all sorts of things.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I would be so bored for those rehearsals.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I bet because you're probably tuned out the whole time.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

They wouldn't let me leave. I couldn't go do something else.

**Julie Vallimont**

You were not old enough to be unsupervised. Oh, man, there's so many different conversational directions we'll go in. But.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Oh, there's just something about, I just remembered a thing, like how so, so many of our Great Bear sets where Andrew had a guitar riff, a guitar hook for the first tune, and he would play it. And then he would kind of think of and teach mom this piano part to also do the guitar riff to do that. And then they would do that, and then they would play it once they were playing it. Well, then I could pay attention again. And then I would write a tune on top of it and then that would be that was how like, 90% of all the Great Bear sets were written.

**Julie Vallimont**

So the tune came after the riff.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Almost always the tune was just like.... and now Noah, you do something!

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, man. Well, we'll talk about tune writing. But I just wanted to add that like when I was a new piano player, I wanted to just hear as much contra music, not a new piano player but a new contra player. I wanted to hear as much contra music as possible.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

When you were like, one.

**Julie Vallimont**

When I was one in contra years, just a contra infant. And I put a whole bunch of things on my iPod. Remember those? I had all these albums on my iPod and Dancing Again by Great Bear was one of them. And so just that sound of you guys playing tunes, that's a very tune-based album, and your mom's just playing boom chuck piano. And, you know, I think when I started playing with you in a band, which I never would have predicted when I was a contra infant that we would end up in a band together. I felt like I already knew your playing because I had learned while listening to it. And also, you already knew how to play with a piano player. And that was really cool. That's all. I'm not trying to go anywhere.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I'm nodding and smiling.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, he's nodding enthusiastically, that's great for an audio medium. Yeah, we could talk about tune writing, we could talk about, why don't we talk about contra dance playing first in general. So eventually, you know you played for... I know you guys used to like to busk at farmer's markets, and you played for dances. When did you start really touring a lot? Because now I mean Great Bear for the last few years was known as a touring band. You guys played dance weekends all over the country. And you were on the national circuit, probably the busiest fiddler, played the most dance weekends.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

As far as dance weekends go we tallied it up and definitely yes, as far as dance weekends go.

**Julie Vallimont**

Especially like the last couple years between Great Bear plus Buddy Sytem.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Great Bear, Buddy System and then there was some other newer projects that were starting that 2017, I played 34 or 35 dance weekends.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's insane.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yep. And that was just the dance weekends because then we also had like a whole bunch of other gigs in between all of the dance weekends, but yeah, that was a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, this has literally been your life.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah. Since I was 10. So we didn't start touring when I was 10 obviously, but I would say our first our first dance weekend that we flew to was in 2006. And it was oh, I need to remember the name of it. It was the Dallas, Texas dance weekend. When in Doubt Swing. I think it's still happening. But that was the first dance weekend, Rhonda Beckman, who who ran that weekend heard us at Flurry and liked us and like she hired us for our first weekend, and they got plane tickets. That was like a big deal. And so 2006 we started, like flying, traveling farther to gigs and 2006 is also when we did our first southern tour. Which is very funny to think like, think that now that I live in Asheville. That's very funny thinking back to my first southern tour I never thought I would live in Asheville. Yep, that's weird. It's great. It's fun. But surprise.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, the ways that life takes us we can't always predict.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

So I think we really started traveling a lot in 2006-2007 and it just, it just kept on, kept on going more and more and more and more from then till the end. Pretty much. I think it got started getting, like we would play like the average of like, 15 dance weekends a year, Great Bear would. 15-17 dance weekends a year from like 2012 ish through 2017 or 18.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you've played for all kinds of dances, you've played for like the smallest community dances. You probably, I mean I know you played weddings. Let's say you probably play weddings. I'm like, wait, I played them with you. You played weddings. We played one wedding where one of the people there who was a brand new dancer brought a dog to dance in line on its hind legs. And Valerie Helbert was calling, she's such a good sport. You know, she's trying to herd everybody at the wedding and she just looked out on the floor. She's like, oh, and there's a dog dancing, okay. With that with the walkthrough, so you played all sorts of dances, you played community dances, you played the dances around New England that are well known like at the Scout House in Concord. You played at the Greenfield Grange, you guys played back at the VFW. When that was still a thing in Boston. That was the first time I ever saw you guys. And I remember the energy was like, palpable, like when you guys played at the Scout House you couldn't get in the doors.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Those were really fun nights.

**Julie Vallimont**

It was just incredible. And, you know, Boston friends said, hey, there's this out of town band. You haven't heard of them, because you're new to this, but they're called Great Bear and they're really fun. And that was just a trio and I went in there was like electricity in the room. It was really cool.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

When that happens. I mean, Buddy System has had that too. And that's what you do it for man. When it's one of those nights that just have it all, whoooo it's hard to beat.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like when the sound's good?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

The sound is good and the floor is good and the lighting is good and the hall's good and it's full of dancers that want to be there.

**Julie Vallimont**

And they're enthusiastic. And you give it out and they give it back.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Now, those are good times.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Normally in this podcast I ask people kind of analytical questions about their playing. I know that's not really your jam.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I wouldn't have many answers.

**Julie Vallimont**

So I'll ask you and see what you have to say and then I'll happily help you out.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Let's do this!

**Julie Vallimont**

If you had a philosophy as a contra dance fiddler, or like what are the things you do to play to the dancers?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Okay, I can do this. My approach to playing fiddle for contra dance is when you're like, playing the fiddle you are almost more rhythm than the rhythm players. Like if you're arranging a contra dance, the piano and the guitar and stuff would have, this is how Great Bear approached it, you'd have like a hook or a thing that was memorable and that became the melody for dancers. Like that's the thing that dancers would hum and like remember, musically, which then left the fiddle tune to be like just this steady, rhythmic 16th notes that just make up rhythm. It's just rhythm and that isn't to say that there aren't some awesome tunes, and tunes matter. But I feel like as a fiddler playing for contra dance, my number one priority is rhythm and letting the memorable parts come from the backup.

**Julie Vallimont**

With a catchy part.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

The catchy, memorable parts ,because a dancer in general has a lot going on. They're thinking about a lot. They're remembering the main moves and and whether or not they are flirting with the person they're dancing with or very much wanting to have the dance end and anywhere in between. They have a lot going on. And they don't have the brain space to like, think of a little fiddle tune, [sings], they're not listening to that, they are listening to the backup, just rhythm that's telling their feet where to go. And they can pick up slower melodies, like a riff or a hook. And so the the fiddle tune then becomes almost more supportive to me. Does that answer your question?

**Julie Vallimont**

There's many ways to answer this question. Yes, that was great. Good job. Was it like that in the early days of Great Bear? I mean, in the beginning, you guys just played tunes mostly.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Kind of, when I listen back, the first Great Bear CD is out of print now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, top secret.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

But there are a handful of copies around somewhere and I listened to it recently and it was a lot, there's even a lot of arrangement on that CD like yeah, I mean this mostly came from Andrew. He really really got into it, but we did arrangement, a lot of arrangement from almost the beginning, not the actual beginning. But from almost the beginning.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was there a particular band that inspired you to want to arrange things?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah there was. Yeah, it was Wild Asparagus. Yup. Definitely. I'm sure that's a super common answer, but it's a common answer for a good reason because they did it first. Wild Asparagus was the band at Ashokan, when Andrew and Mom went and I was too young. And that was the first time Andrew heard this music arranged. And like you could do something more with this than just play the tune. And it felt better. And so yeah, that was right at the beginning of Great Bear. So really, yeah, right from the beginning, we were trying, attempting to do arrangement things.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you had this nice like, kind of cauldron of ideas at home where you could just stay at home and play with ideas all day.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

All day, every day.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you just end up coming up with your own sound kind of being in this bubble. It makes your fiddle playing really unique. And how do you feel playing for, like when Buddy System plays I feel like we have very intentionally chosen to sometimes have arrangements and sometimes not. It's like one foot in each world, there's one foot in the world of we're playing a good solid tune, and we're just gonna play the crap out of it, pardon my French. Just try to play it as well as we can with energy. But then other times we'll do these like really elaborate arrangements and riffs and stuff, because that's also fun. What's your take on those things?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I definitely like both. I would say that, so Buddy System was the first band that I was part of that didn't have Andrew in it. And that was new. That was new and special. We were at Ashokan and we became buddies.

**Julie Vallimont**

We were camp buddies. You play this icebreaker game and then the person you're with is your buddy for the week.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

And we ran with that for a decade. We're still running with that. I should tell Jay like, hey, we're still doing that thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

That thing where we were camp buddies.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

2000-whatever. So we were buddies there and then you did the techno thing and I think I suggested it. Right? That like, hey, I want to be in a techno band.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah you asked me.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I want to be......that sounds fun. And it was, it was very fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was at Ashokan with Nor'easter but they wanted one late night techno concert for the kids and I'd been dabbling in it with some other bands and you asked if you could play with me.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah. And I was I think, I think subconsciously I was like, just kind of looking for some way to play music outside of the context of Great Bear.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a healthy, healthy thing to do.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

And so yeah, anyway, Buddy System was the first band that I was that I was in without without Andrew and the way you play piano obviously is like, SO different from Mom's, like everything was just so different and I then realized that I was playing different. I play fiddle so different in Buddy System than I do in Great Bear, so so so different and in lots of ways it's a much more satisfying experience because in Great Bear it's really the other way around of like, I think of it as just being rhythm. While there's a rock song going on, like a pop song going on. And in Buddy System it was like, oh, no, these actually are about the tunes, like I'm still all about rhythm to me. But the tunes do matter and you were able to back me up in a way that freed me to like, do whatever I wanted, because I couldn't actually do whatever I wanted in Great Bear, it was so arranged. I mean, I have like this time through to take a solo, do whatever you want. But then you have to go right back to the arrangement and in Buddy System, just a duo, and I just like, I just would do whatever I wanted all the time. And then you were always somehow right there. How did you do that? So that was really, really great. It was felt really great for me to play music in a completely different way, fiddle in a very different way.

**Julie Vallimont**

It was it was really fun when we were a new band, because we had to learn how to, any new band. We've talked about this in past episodes, but any new band takes more work than it might look from the outside where you have to like learn how each other works. Unless you're like you and Andrew, where you grew up together.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

We still did that. It was just, we just, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

You did it. You had to do it too. I mean, everyone has to do it.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Everyone has to do it. You just spend a lot of time together.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I remember, like, I had played in many pickup bands and I have many just friends who we do casual dances with once in a while for fun. And so I'm used to fiddlers having tune lists and it's like, "So Noah, what's your tune list?" and you're like, "...tune...list...?"

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Cosmic Tim?

**Julie Vallimont**

And it was really interesting to pull that out of you because you knew all these traditional tunes from all your years at Ashokan and playing in the jams and, you know, you'd grown up listening to a lot of really classic albums, which we can get into... you know, Liz Carroll and, man who's the other...female fiddler...uh, uh, showy fiddler? Eileen Ivers! And they listed all sorts of things and so, you knew a lot of tunes but you didn't know you knew them? I used to joke in the early days of Buddy System you were the fiddler but I had the fiddler brain where I kept track of all the tunes and what they're called and taught you repertoire.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Very true.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you were the accompanist, like, your playing is so rhythmic. Like you're one of the most rhythmic fiddlers I've ever met. And as a piano player, it's really fun to play with you because it means that I can be rhythmic but I don't have to. And that frees me up to do all sorts of things, chords and pads and textures and things with my left hand. And I think that's one of the things that makes it possible for us to play as a duo. Because, you know, there aren't a lot of duos in contra dancing and there are many, but most people want a fuller sound.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Want at least, third person, yep.

**Julie Vallimont**

And just more people to like, hold down the rhythm. And we could do both things. And there is times when I would be playing the melody in my right hand and a bass line in my left hand on the piano and then you'd be backing me up with the shuffling that was so rhythmic.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I'd be the guitar.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and that was really fun. And so I was grateful for all your experience being a rhythm player in Great Bear because you had this whole texture, this whole palette of things you could do, it wasn't just play the tune. It was also like chops and shuffles and harmonies.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Lots of noises.

**Julie Vallimont**

Noises, lots of noises and little counter melody lines and they're all very like, pop. They have this pop sensibility to them. They're all very catchy.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, that makes sense. I'm listening to Julie. I'm like, yeah, I'm learning too, like, yeah, that makes sense.

**Julie Vallimont**

We've never talked about this before?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I'm learning about myself. That's a good point you make there.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then and then to watch you like, oh, what's the right phrase? "Come into your own" is too patronizing a phrase, but watch you embrace this role as a melody fiddler was really, really fun.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

It was meaningful for me too. I felt it too, for me was when there was all those other, you know, options of things to do, like you playing melody, me playing rhythm and also but then when you would also play rhythm and it was just double rhythm. That didn't happen in Great Bear, like that sort of rhythm lock thing didn't happen in Great Bear, we would always split things up and try to maximize things, but not... like almost... opposite of maximizing, just like, just do the rhythm. Ah. Very, very satisfying, very satisfying.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then we could do unison melody, like, I love unison melody for dances. That's one of my favorite things. And so we could do both things and then only two people makes the arranging a little bit easier if we get our mind meld where we can anticipate what the other is going to do.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

That's where it's at.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's where it's at.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

This is kind of the feet, the feet, I'm glad there are feet too, that helped the sound.

**Julie Vallimont**

Totally. I don't think we could do all these things.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Two and a half people. Yeah, the feet. Definitely. Well, it's a big part of it......

**Julie Vallimont**

We're cheating because you're two people, because you're the fiddle and the feet and I'm the right hand and the left hand, and they're not doing boomchuck all the time. Boom chuck is one musical concept, but I'm doing two musical concepts some of the time and so we can get four people's worth out of two people, but only having two brains to have to coordinate with each other.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

And the only splitting of money up two ways.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's tens of dollars. Can we talk about your foot percussion a little bit?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

It's similar to the fiddle thing. I didn't have a teacher. And it's pretty much self taught. But I think it was from Ashokan, Mom actually learned it. Someone told mom what it was. And then she can came back and showed Andrew and I, like, "It's this! You know, toe, toe, heel, toe toe, heel toe toe heel" and showed us what it was. So then, for whatever reason, Andrew wasn't interested in doing that. So I was like, okay, I'll do that. And then I just have never stopped doing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you've kind of developed your own style.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

And then because that it's definitely turned into its own, it doesn't sound very French Canadian, sometimes.

**Julie Vallimont**

And why should that have to? That's not the kind of music you're playing.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Nope.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you've really like created this contra dance style of foot percussion. Can you play for us? Since we have microphones and your feet, and we have a floor. Can you do like basic French Canadian feet and then show us some of your cool accents that you often do. Now I'll just lean over here, I'll lean my mic towards your feet. Okay, go ahead.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah. [Foot percussion] So, here's the normal foot percussion thing and then at the end of phrases is where you mess with it so 1, 2....[foot percussion] yeah, you don't want to do too much, because then it just sounds like noise.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you're very careful with your phrasing. Like when you're playing for dancers.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

It's very matched to what I'm playing on fiddle, like what I'm playing on fiddle informs what I do on feet very very much. Which is actually kind of funny sometimes when we record things we did this with the Buddy System CD when you need to record the feet first for like sonic reasons and you're not gonna do it at the same time, you want like just the feet to do the feet without playing fiddle... that was a trip.

**Julie Vallimont**

You had to take your fiddle into the booth with you and play air fiddle. Yeah, like moving your fingers over the fingerboard. And were you also air bowing?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

No, I wasn't air bowing.

**Julie Vallimont**

It was just the fingerboard end of things.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I was imagining the bowing part.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you're matching the tune in your head. Okay, so could you play us a tune, maybe from The Great Bear years and put some foot percussion with it.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, I can do that. I think I'm gonna play, so this is to show how like, that the tune without the riff, The Great Bear riff thing that everyone remembers sounds very different, this is a this is Cosmic Tim, this is the tune that had the big, big, big big thing that everyone would like sing the last three years of Great Bear. Everyone would sing that everytime we played. It was very, very fun. Yeah but I'll just play the tune without without the riff. It's different. [Tuning fiddle noises, then fiddle playing tune]

**Julie Vallimont**

That tune I think stands on its own, but...

**Noah VanNorstrand**

But it's different.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's different.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Changes

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And then what if you then contrast that with a different kind of tune, like something from Buddy System.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I'll play a tune called Dragon Hatchery we used to play.

**Julie Vallimont**

There were some nice variations in that.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, that was fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, the way you play those two tunes is different. Like your tone is different. I mean, when you play Dragon Hatchery there, you put a bunch of ornaments in it. Your facial expressions suggested to me that it was kind of happening without your conscious knowledge and consent.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Which is very true for most of how I play music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Things just happen.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Things just happen.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, I don't want to make this whole episode all about Buddy System. It's just, I mean, that's the thing we have in common so it's just the easiest thing to talk about. But that for me is an "accompanist" which I feel like, I come into Buddy System with that philosophy, even though that's not what I'm doing anymore. But it is the philosophy of like, listening to what you're doing and try to bring out different aspects of your playing and support them in different ways.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

And it totally, totally worked.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because there's some times when I could, the way I play affects how many variations you do and affects whether you stay on the melody or go off the melody.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

And that's been, that's actually a point that I've thought of this pandemic and quarantine and not playing with other people anymore. But still wanting to play music so that's why I kind of started this write a tune a day thing I'm doing right now, just an excuse, just keep on playing music, but I'm realizing how I'm very impressionable. Like how I play fiddle really depends on who is playing backup. And I'm remembering that now like, from playing with Andrew he would play one groove, one idea and I would write a tune. And he would play the same chord progression with a completely different feel and I would just write a completely different tune, like I'm very, my style is very impressionable by whatever the backup players do. I follow that a lot. So what you were saying makes sense. You can count, once you get to know me, you can kind of make me do what you want me to do. As a backup,

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, I wasn't gonna say that out loud, but absolutely.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, it's pretty cool. Because I don't really, not meaning to, it's not conscious, but it's like, okay, if you're gonna do that, then I'm gonna do that.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you pull on this, like, different repertoire of things. Like you have a lot of contra dance tricks in your fiddling, you know, and that's not a bad thing. It's, you know, like, five chords and drones and like, various things.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Rhythm, rhythm.

**Julie Vallimont**

Rhythm, rhythm to build tension. But, I mean, the best way to hear all those things is just to go on YouTube and look for videos of Great Bear. There are many, many videos... and Buddy System too. So it's actually easier to hear in Buddy System because there's just two of us, there's not a whole rhythm section building behind you or an electric guitar and you can hear what you're doing there. Do you worry stylistically about...?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Nope. I don't even know the end of your question. [both laugh]

**Julie Vallimont**

I knew that's how you were gonna respond when I asked it. Thank you.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I'm curious to see what the end of the question is. But no.

**Julie Vallimont**

No, I mean, that's I mean, that's the fun thing is that for contras you don't worry stylistically about what you're doing. Like in your head are you considering, is something traditional or not? Is that relevant?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Nope. The only thing I'm considering, I'm only considering this when I'm actually being good and thinking about it, is it danceable? Like, what does this do for a dancing experience? That is the only bit of "thinking" about what I'm playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, you're very locked into the dancers when you play. And I mean, for me, that's one of my favorite things as a dance musician is that feeling when the whole dance floor is moving together, and we're locked in as a band and we're locked in with them and the caller is groovin'. The choreography is just right. And I mean, that's a kind of traditional, like, it wasn't always part of the contra dance experience. Like that wasn't the point of contra dancing. That's a super tight, subliminal mind meld between everyone. But that's a feature of modern contra dancing that is like a new kind of traditional that a lot of people really enjoy. It's what a lot of especially dance weekend dancers want to get that kind of high from, it's exhilarating when it happens.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

It is there's a, there's a magical thing that sometimes happens. And when you hit it, it's just perfect.

**Julie Vallimont**

And so you do that without having to worry about like what styles you're drawing on. You know, like, when I met you, I was trying to figure out where all the influences came from in your playing. I mean, 'cause you're also a multi-instrumentalist. You also play guitar and tenor guitar and mandolin and didgeridoo. Which I will not make you play on the podcast.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I actually literally don't know where it is.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that your favorite thing?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I feel so good, I don't know where it is. It's so, I mean, it's gone.

**Julie Vallimont**

You're free. I mean, that was mostly pulled out in Great Bear. And it was always a crowd pleaser but not your main expressive instrument.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

No, those were fun times that are now done and that's fine.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. But, like so when I first started playing with you and really trying to figure out your fiddle style, because I like to think about tunes as different genres, like I might accompany an Irish tune differently than like an old time tune or French Canadian tune or whatever. And you're playing has all these elements of all these things in it. It's got a little bit of Irish, it's got some, like, that Eileen Ivers kind of touch to it with the little fancy ornaments and the.....

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Celtic-y things.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, the flourishes and things that she does. But then it's got this really droney double stoppy, oh, if you want to analyze your fiddle style for us, by the way, please feel free.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

This is great.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm guessing you don't want to.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I mean, this is better than I could say.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you've got that, like, Appalachian old time influence with all the droney double stops.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I feel like, and I have actually thought about this a little bit recently, and I've been able to, the two main ones are old time and Celtic, and I feel like I play old time tunes... I play old time tunes with triplets and ornaments and like, with Celtic sensibilities and vice versa, like I can play, I tend to play, like, Celtic-y tunes with much more droney Appalachian sort of rhythm. Right hand. And what that equals is kind of contra dance music, like it's that like, fast and intricate but then all rhythm, like all about the rhythm.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, which is your bow hand. Yeah, and like, old time music being so rhythmic I don't know if you're specifically drawing on that or if it's just your own, I don't know a lot about bowing.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I was zoned out on everything that Rodney Miller talked about bowing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you think you picked it up subliminally, or?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I glazed over for anything anyone talked about bowing. I have no idea of what I picked up. I haven't ever given my bowing any thought other than wanting to make it sound danceable. So if that means an up bow, cool. Or a down bow or a slur, like yeah, definitely, I haven't ever. We played a little, Andrew got really into Swedish music for a while. And so because I just copied what Andrew did that we did with some Swedish music, and I would, there was a little bit then there where I was trying to learn bowing and I hated every minute of it.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's not how your brain works. You're a figure it out yourself kind of person. But I think that's what one of the things that makes your style like, you're like a contra fiddler, like through and through. I mean, you play many other kinds of music well, and your mandolin playing is really different from your fiddling. This is fascinating to me. It's like a whole other brain that you put on when you play the mandolin.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yes, that's, yep.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like your mandolin playing is super clean and super neat and very crisp.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Right Oh, yeah. I don't know how to make, you can't make noises on the mandolin in the same way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Whereas in the fiddle, you play a lot with dissonance and being like in between the notes and dissonant double stops.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Some people would say it's out of tune, but actually just playing in between the notes on purpose.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I'm not gonna go there. You're in a band with a fixed pitch instrument, my friend. I always know when you're out of tune. When I really understood your fiddle style the first year I went to Ashokan you know, you said that you had been going, this would have been your 20th the Ashokan coming up. And unfortunately, you know, because of the pandemic, it didn't happen. And that's when I realized there was this melting pot of like these Catskills, fiddle style, because there is like a Catskills, New York area fiddle style and Jay's style, which is very swingy. And that was like the missing piece. But then also, you've got like the New England playing of David Kaynor, you've got the Celtic teachers who come through. You've got folks like Rodney Miller, who's from New England and rooted in that but also with his own influences and his own style and Swedish music, Scandinavian music there.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Always a big part of the week.

**Julie Vallimont**

French Canadian music there, some of the lift in the bowing comes from that kind of music, like very syncopated kind of tunes and the foot percussion and it just all comes together in this melting pot.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Called contra dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, modern contra dancing is many tunes for many styles all blended together. So in that sense, that's what you do. Except you write a lot of your own tunes.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah. And that came about, mostly from, from just laziness. Like, not wanting to like, when we started a band, you had to teach me a lot of repertoire, because I didn't really know a lot of tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

We literally spent a year, every time we rehearsed, I would just teach you tunes, I must have taught you 100 tunes.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Because whenever I was bored of the tunes that I already knew, like, you just write a tune. You wouldn't having to like find a tune and learn it. Make sure you learn it right, it's just from laziness. I just didn't, I didn't want to do any of that when, like in high school. And then yeah, just being like a habit and I like writing tunes now quite a bit.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you've written many tunes now.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Andrew and I, I probably should plug this, right? Andrew put together a tune book last year. He's been putting it together for many years but he finally like actually got it done last year. That's 100 tunes of Andrew and I and over the past 20 years, and all the best ones. I think it's most the tunes off of all of our CDs and then more on top of that, but yeah, lots of tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you think at all about adding tunes to the contra tradition versus looking up old tunes, or do you think about why you play tunes, or you just play what you like?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, probably just play what I like. I will say that whenever something comes up where I hear that someone has played a tune of mine at a contra dance, or it has made its way into some local repertoire. It is a pretty good feeling, it feels good. So, anyway, if anyone wants to do more of that, you know,you're welcome to, please feel free. I have tune called Winchells Falls, it's kind of gotten out a little bit and it's like........

**Julie Vallimont**

Gondolin had a good run.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Right, 'cause Gondolin's in the Portland II collection so that......

**Julie Vallimont**

You write a lot of tunes, and when you're writing tunes, you don't worry about like, is this traditional or not? Or does a contra tradition need any more tunes? You just enjoy it. And you do it.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Not thinking any of that. Nope.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Well, I'm not saying you should have to. Yeah, you know, but just because we often look at things through a certain lens. It's interesting to think about that. I mean, that is a living tradition, you know, you're just out there doing what you want to do and the dancers, you know, usually love it. I'm not gonna assume that everyone likes your tunes, but.....

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I do wonder.

**Julie Vallimont**

But your tunes are usually great for contra dances because they're well phrased for contra dances. They have a rhythmic energy to them and unlike your 12 year old self, I find your tunes now, usually they imply chords very strongly. Like you somehow figured out chords in the last like 15 years or whatever.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Whew! Just in time to not have anyone to play with. In this weird... doing this tune a day, it's much easier for my tunes all to just kind of sound alike, because I don't have any backup person like telling me how to play. It just kind of goes to a default thing, which is usually some sort of very rhythmic, French Canadian sort of old time-y Celtic driving thing. But it's always like the same, always ends up being that same feel. Well, not always, but it takes more work to write and play differently without having some backup musician to inform that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, to push yourself out of that, or without having different kinds of input, like my tune writing is very influenced by whatever I'm listening to and playing.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

That helps too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, you have this really interesting ability to remember a tune and hold it in your head as you're writing it. And I can hear you as you're writing a tune, you're playing through it and you're revising it as you go and you're conscious, like you can hold it like a three dimensional projection and look at it from all angles and change it which a lot of people can't do. You know, so there's trade offs like you also don't read sheet music very well.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yes, I can't read music at all.

**Julie Vallimont**

I said "very well" because I was trying to be generous, but we can say "at all."

**Noah VanNorstrand**

This is honest. Contra Pulse is about getting to honesty!

**Julie Vallimont**

Take the real pulse. But you learn tunes incredibly fast. And you write tunes incredibly fast and you hold them in your head so it's really like, you know, your brain is set up for these other things.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

That is the norm, that like, writing a tune and revising it as you go. That's like the usual thing that I do while writing a tune, and then you do get like, lucky. And sometimes the tune just happens the first time you play it and it's just the way it is the from the very first time you play it, and those are like very, very rare. And they always make it feel real special, like they always they always feel real good to like, just play something and then that's just the way it is. Like, that happened recently and this only happened like, probably like under 10 times of writing tunes. I like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it just comes out fully formed and you're kind of like, where did that come from?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I don't know, but I like it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or more often I'll get like, or you'll get like an A part. It'll just come to you and then write a B part to go with it.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, that's more often, that's more common.

**Julie Vallimont**

But you'll get like half a tune come fully formed, like a good hook in it. And then you just finish it later.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I guess that kind of happened yesterday.

**Julie Vallimont**

We were talking about inspiration, a couple episodes back in the episode with Kate Barnes. And I usually ask people, so what inspires you? But then talking, when we were getting to know each other as bandmates. I asked you that question and you're like......

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Blank stare.

**Julie Vallimont**

So I told everybody that I would make sure we came back to it today so that you could talk about your own inspiration in your own words.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Nice. I so like, there are very, very, very rare times when inspiration does happen. It's usually a person. And those are super, super rare. So it's not that it never happens. And when it does happen, it is like, oh, this is what inspiration feels like. Like, this is what everyone's talking about. Because other than those very rare times, I kind of don't even understand the concept. Like what inspiration? They're notes in an order. The end.

**Julie Vallimont**

Where do they come from? If they don't come from inspiration.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Where do they come from?

**Julie Vallimont**

Are they motor patterns in your fingers?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Probably yeah? Yeah, and you just get lucky coming up with a new pattern and sometimes the pattern ends up being some thing that's catchy and good and that's cool. Yeah, that inspiration is such an elusive thing for me to actually feel.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you ever sing? Do you ever write tunes by singing them? Or do they always come out of instruments in your hands?

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I would say like 90% always instruments but yeah, some once or twice. Yesterday was the tune a day thing was.......

**Julie Vallimont**

Wantastiquet.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Wantastiquet. We were walking somewhere and I was singing, and it was like, oh, I should remember that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. I think it's partly like a little bit of discipline or like the process, learning the process of making a note of your ideas as they go by and just remembering to grab them before they go off into the atmosphere and sing them into your phone or get back to your fiddle and record it or something and you write a lot of tunes during soundchecks.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Soundcheck tunes are the best. Oh, maybe not the best, but they're fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I just got in the habit of like, oh, Noah's writing the soundcheck tune, and I'm just gonna get my phone out for him and start recording, save you the trouble. And then often like we'll finish soundchecking but you want to keep playing a tune to keep finishing it and then the caller's got everyone lined up and you're like, while they're doing the walkthrough, you'll turn around really quickly and play the tune into your phone. Right before the four potatoes.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

I think there's something about the soundcheck tune and you have, you're amplified. You don't ever usually write music when you're amplified so your brain thinks of different notes to play.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you sound different.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

You sound different.

**Julie Vallimont**

More resonant, something.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

You hear yourself, active reverb maybe, I don't know, like, it's different when you're amplified. So soundcheck tunes is like the only time you get to write while you're being loud, made louder.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, this isn't a tunecraft podcast although that would be fun...

**Noah VanNorstrand**

It is now!

**Julie Vallimont**

I know, we can talk about whatever we want to, it's all contra related. One fun story is that, actually the way you wrote that tune Dragon Hatchery we were actually together at a rehearsal in Tennessee.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, Jonesborough.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, Jonesborough at the house called the dragon hatchery. And I was testing out a new reverb pedal for the techno setup and we had like a D drone going on that I was playing with reverb and you just were holding your fiddle and you started noodling over it with your reverb effects. You fell asleep while noodling. And I noticed that you were playing the same ideas over and over again and I actually realized that you wrote a tune. So I got out my phone and recorded what you were playing with your eyes closed and you seemed to have no awareness of me at all.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

That was very, that's never happened before. That was like a one time thing so far, like, because I do vividly remember waking up. I woke up playing a tune that I did not go to sleep playing. And I don't think I ever have actually played fiddle in my sleep. That's also something, but yeah, I remember waking up playing the tune. Like what? What's this? What am I playing? And then I woke up and saw that Julie was recording. It's like, Okay, good. What else? Did I say anything?

**Julie Vallimont**

Too bad you're not a sleep talker.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Yeah, that was interesting. It wasn't like deep sleep, obviously, but it was definitely a doze. So it's not conscious.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, I find that I learn tunes the fastest at three in the morning. Like those late night jams at camps. I learn the most tunes in the summer. I could learn a tune from a recording, which is my other favorite way to learn and I just play the recording over and over again until my brain picks up on it like 20 times or so through the tune. My brain has memorized all the ornaments and all the chord subs and everything. But my favorite way is like Maine Fiddle Camp, 3am out under the trees by the water, or inside a building because we're supposed to be indoors. They go into my brain faster. It's like my conscious brain isn't thinking and getting in the way. It's like they bypass the whole front of my brain and goes directly into the tune storage center. So most people don't try that as a creative outlet. Although I have written some piano things when I'm sleepy. You know, I'm most creative at night because I can stop worrying about the day and just let my brain turn off. So you know if anyone's out there thinking about writing tunes, here's some very impractical tips from Noah and Julie. We recommend sleeping, drones, 3am sessions outdoors in the summer.

**Noah VanNorstrand**

Good luck!

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