**Contra Pulse Episode 13 – George Marshall**

**Julie Vallimont**

Well hello, George Marshall, and welcome to Contra Pulse.

**George Marshall**

Thank you so much for having me here.

**Julie Vallimont**

I am delighted to have you here. I delighted to see you again. It's been months.

**George Marshall**

In fact, I think it was in the end... or the middle of March was the last time I saw you, where we were engaged in the last contra dancing that I know of that was happening in the world.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right. We were in Hawaii at your beautiful week. And that was the last contra dancing I was at. And then we came home and everything got really weird. And speaking of really weird, it's a very exciting day in Brattleboro on the porch, we seem to in addition to the normal dump trucks seem to have some really exciting chainsaw action going on. So I apologize for that. But how long can they use a chainsaw, right? It can't last forever.

**George Marshall**

One can hope.

**Julie Vallimont**

Our listeners have heard all sorts of noises from my porch in the last few months, but this is the best way to do this in a pandemic. So George, it's really an honor to have you here. Your name has come up several times in our previous episodes talking about you know, [Swallowtail](http://www.swallowtail.com/album_order.html) and [Wild Asparagus](http://band.wildasparagus.com/music/purchase-music/) and the evolution of this kind of current generation of contra dance music, and you have the fun perspective of... well, you can decide if it's fun or not, but you have a unique perspective of being a caller as well as a musician. And so I hope to draw on both of those perspectives as we talk today. Could you tell us a little bit about how you got started playing for dances and and how your bands ended up coming about?

**George Marshall**

Sure I'd be happy to. For me, my experience is it really started with the dancing. And when I was 15, I was working for the Appalachian Mountain Club up in New Hampshire, out of [Pinkham Notch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinkham_Notch) out of the North Conway area, and it was a summer program that was for college students. And no, I wasn't in college at age 15. But I was large for a 15 year old and I was starting to grow a beard and I was lucky enough to be taken on even as a high school student for this college program, which was to build and repair trails in the White Mountain National Forest through the Appalachian Mountain Club's trail program. And so what that meant was that you, either with a group of other trail workers or on your own, you would go into the woods for a week with food and tools and and then you'd repair or build trails. And of course, they wanted to have the workers in the woods on the weekends where most people were hiking, so that there would be a visible presence and progress was being made. And hopefully that would encourage people to make donations to the Appalachian Mountain Club or to the trail project. And so, our Friday was basically Tuesday, and then Wednesday and Thursday were our Saturday and Sunday, so we'd come out of the woods on a Tuesday and we'd go back into the woods on on a Friday, which conveniently left Thursday night as our Sunday night. And it turned out that a lot of the people on the trail crew were really big fans of contra dancing. And I was like, I don't know what this is, I did square dancing in fifth grade. But these people I really like and respect are going off to do this contra dancing thing, I want to go too. So what would happen my first dance, you know, it was a 15-passenger van with no seats. And so we were kind of like, there were like 20 people in a 15-passenger van stacked in like cord wood as you can imagine. And it was about an hour away. So at over like, little tiny... it was in Tamworth, New Hampshire and of course, we're up in North Conway. So if you look at a map, you can see that's kind of distant and getting there is over hill and dale, up and down little roads, but I was assured that it was worth it, and I got to the dance and it was at a place called Stafford's in the Field, which was an old country inn, and they hired two callers, Dudley Laufman and Taylor Whiteside would alternate weeks. And [they had a summer dance program that they did every Thursday night](http://tamworthoutingclub.org/a-closer-look-at-outing-club-dances.html). So of course, we didn't leave in time to get there early. And so it was already a little dark, it was late dusk, and there was [this beautiful barn](https://bloximages.newyork1.vip.townnews.com/conwaydailysun.com/content/tncms/assets/v3/editorial/f/b9/fb97dabc-c8c8-11e7-8377-9348a54bdbf2/5a0a28939f9bb.image.jpg?resize=1200%2C900) and [light was spilling out of it](http://nhtraveler.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/brassheartinn_-13.jpg) and wonderful sounds and people laughing and whooping and hollering and having a great time. And we piled out of the van and I was the only person that at that time — well actually that's not true, there were three of us — that had never done it before that night. And we got out of the van and most people knew what to do and so they said, you know, come on in, we'll have a great time. Just do what everybody else is doing. And I thought, okay, so I got in there and it was a blast. And, you know, it was in the middle of a dance so we were, like, running around the room and people were dancing. And when the music stopped, we stopped. And then one of the local dancers said, hey, you know, it'd be good if you had a partner and join one of these sets, and I was like, partner? sets? I mean, I wasn't using that before. I don't see why I should, but oh, yes, okay, sure and she was like, would you like to dance? And I said, sure. And so it was like learning a new language. It was learning a new language of terms and terminology and you know, I was blown away. And at the at the ripe old age of 15. I was like, who are these people and where have they been all my life? I totally love this. I love the whole thing. Everything about it. And I couldn't wait 'til the next week to go back. And you know, that was despite the fact that of course, we were all dancing barefoot on a wood floor after having been in hiking boots for weeks at a time. And so our feet were very tender and we'd get blisters dancing, and then by the next week our blisters would have healed up in the hiking boots and we get the blisters all over again. So I learned some good techniques about how to deal with that aspect of it but that was about the only negative. So I did that for the the rest of the summer and it was great. And I've made some made lifelong friends through the trail crew and it is really... with my love of nature and hiking and all the rest of it was a wonderful thing. But then also discover contra dancing, where they're like my people, was really a wonderful, great thing. And it was contra dancing and square dancing and Sicilian circle and couple dances, waltzes and things like like that as well. It was a pretty standardized program that the callers were doing and it was really fun. And when I went home, I lived outside of Boston and Cambridge in a small suburb. And I really started missing dancing. So I tried to figure out if there was dancing in Boston; it turned out there was a lot. And so by the end of that school year, I was dancing six or seven nights a week and loving it. And my regular dance was the dance outside of Central Square or in Central Square that was the pretty regular thing and then went as far as I could to find other dancing, a little bit to Concord, Massachusetts. Until I got a car it was hard to make that trip, but using public transportation the dances in Cambridge were — and its surrounding area — it was really easy to get to. So then I went off to college and there wasn't very much dancing at all.

**Julie Vallimont**

Where did you go to college?

**George Marshall**

I went to college at Amherst College. And I didn't realize that that particular school had been an all men's college. And my year was the first co-ed year, the year before, they'd had some women upperclassmen to kind of pave the way. But somehow it just entirely.was totally off my radar that this was a thing that there was any kind of segregation or that this hadn't had a history of... I didn't really, I can't believe that I didn't know that, but I didn't. And I got there and I was totally surprised. But there was one dance a month, Dudley Laufman, who was one of the callers that were calling for the Tamworth dance, would come down and do a dance, and I was in severe withdrawal. And occasionally there'd be other dances, and if I had transportation and could have driven to Connecticut I could have gone to Ralph Sweet's dance or even up to Brattleboro, as it turns out if I'd known about them. There were other dances in the area but I couldn't really make it there. Cammy Kaynor, who later started several series of dances and was living in the area he'd grown up there. And his family — Van, his brother, and his cousin David — kind of were all starting up bands at the same time, and dances. But I was sitting in my dorm room, you know, trying to study and I heard this contra dance music coming through the window. I heard an accordion being played and dance tunes that I recognized and I was at that point, I had a concertina on order because I saw somebody playing concertina in one of the Cambridge dances. And I was like, same thing about dancing, I, you know, I saw dancing, I went, oh, I want to do that. I saw somebody playing the concertina, and I went, that's what I want to play. And so I ran up to the guy who was playing and said, what are you playing and how do I find one? And he was, of course taken back a little bit, but gave me the information of a place that sold instruments suitable for beginners. And so I ordered one and was waiting for it to arrive. In the meantime, I was playing tin whistle and teaching myself tunes so I had a little bit of familiarity with a repertoire. And so I ran down three flights of stairs and across two courtyards to find this guy playing an accordion. And I ran up to him and I said, ah, you're playing contra dance music and he said yes. And I said, you're gonna have a band and I'm gonna be in it.

**Julie Vallimont**

That fast, huh?

**George Marshall**

And he said, really? What do you play? And I said, well, I play tin whistle and I've got a concertina on order and he's like, ....aha. But he was a very generous fellow. His name is Chris Keevil. And he was part of the Five College orchestra, he played bassoon with the orchestra. So he knew a bunch of people and so we started having sessions, and he also knew how to call because he'd grown up in the town next to Concord and had learned how to call, and he was also working for the Farm and Wilderness Foundation, and they had a very active contra dance program, part of the camp. Jack Sloanaker, who was very active at that time, made something called the F and W Stringband, which Dudley Laufman and Rodney Miller were part of and a bunch of other folks were involved with that. And it was really a great opportunity. I didn't know it at the time, but it was the perfect thing to do and say. So we started getting together and we had this kind of loose association. There were, I don't know, 15-20 people that were in the band. And what we would do is we'd play for parties, like if the fraternity — they had fraternities at Amherst — and when they had fraternity party, sometimes they do like square dance mixers or whatever. And so we started doing dances and a bunch of people got involved and we were trying to figure out a name of what we should call ourselves and we really liked playing Swallowtail Jig. It was one of our more successful tunes, we couldn't play the reel that was of the same name, but we could definitely make our way through the jig. And so a friend said, well, you should call yourself Swallowtail 'cause you always play that at your dances. And we're like, okay. So we did that. And it was really a great activity. But after a year and a half of being in college, I was so done. And so actually I was really done at the beginning of my second year of college, and I called up my parents and I said, I don't think I'm in the right place. I don't think I should be doing this. And they said, Okay, come home. And I said, wait, wait, wait, we've already paid for it, I'll do the semester, but afterwards, I think I'm going to stop and they were like, okay, no problem, whatever you want, just come home. And so, I finished out the half the semester and then came back and then went home and promptly got really, really sick. Before I went home, I had... one of my bandmates had a girlfriend who was moving to the West coast, and she needed her truck driven across the country. And I didn't think much of it at the time, because my plan was to go to New Zealand, which I'd heard about all my life, and or Australia. And I was going to work and travel. And at that time, you weren't allowed to get a visa unless you were an engineer, a doctor some profession that they wanted, they had plenty of unskilled labor. And so they didn't want people to do that. But I didn't know that at the time. So I went the embassy to get to the New Zealand embassy to get a visa. And they said, Oh, what do you want to do? And I said, well, I'd like to travel and for six months and work and they said work? I said, well yeah. They said well, sorry, visa denied, and I went, Oh gosh, okay. So I went across the street to the Australian embassy. And I started and I they asked, well, what do you want to do? And I said, I want to travel and spend lots of money and they said, weren't you just over at the New Zealand embassy asking them if you could work? Visa denied. So I remembered my friend's friend needed a truck driven across country and I said, Well, you know, Seattle is not... or the Pacific Northwest is not New Zealand or Australia, but it'll do. So I went back home and I was ready to drive the truck cross country. And I came down with a really bad version of the flu. It was also the great snowstorm, there were like, eight feet of snow on Route 90 going across the country. It was incredible. So fortunately, by the time I was well enough to drive and my friend was like, I really need my truck. If you can't do it this week, I'm going to get somebody else to do it. So I drove across in three days by myself, which I don't recommend doing. I had white line fever really badly by the time I got there, but it was great because my friend had a little shed in the back that I could live in. And I was in Olympia, Washington, and there was a little bit of music and dancing going on there. But the best thing was that there was a program with the local longshoreman where you could register as a longshoreman, you could join the union for 50 bucks and register, and you would be put in a lottery to work unloading containers from container ships. And it was $2,500 a week, and if you won the lottery, you had two weeks worth of work. So I won the lottery and I got to work and now I had an almost $5,000 nest egg that I could use to live on. And I was like, okay, Olympia is great, but it's a little too small. I'd like to go to Seattle where there's more stuff happening. And so I moved to Seattle, and I started going to the dances there. Now the problem was that, at that time, there wasn't any contra dancing really to speak of in Seattle, this was in 1978. And so they had a very strong square dance and old time music community there. Sandy Bradley was very active in that and had a Thursday night dance that was in a bar. Now of course, I'm 18 and the drinking age is 21, but I had a beard and I looked like I was 35 and so I never got carded. I didn't drink. All I wanted to do is go and dance at the square dance, and the way it was set up is that guests could come in and call, guests could come in and play. Just a few members of the band were and there was like a caller that would coordinate everybody. And so when I went up to Sandy and I said, do you ever do any contra dancing? I'd love to do some contra dancing. She said, well, do you know how to call one? And I was like, no, but I could find out and she said, okay, well, you know, when you're ready, just let me know and it would be great for you to call a dance for us. And I thought oh, okay, so I went outside and called my friend Christy and I said I need a dance. So he gave me a dance over the phone. I went back and I said, okay, Sandy, I'm ready. And she said, okay. And I don't remember much about it. But I do remember they said you should do that again next week. So I went back outside to Christy and called, I said okay, I need six more dances. And so I started calling. Every once in a while at that dance and I became friends with a woman named Sherry Nevins who's a wonderful caller from Seattle, organizer now, and at the time, she was calling and sometimes she'd get calls for contra dance weddings and she decided that I was the local expert because I was from New England, and I called contras. And so she would hire me to call some contras at her gigs with her band, the Flash in the Pan String Band that played old time music. And so, I did that for a while. And then I decided I wanted to do a little more traveling and went down to the Bay Area and worked for a friend that was a stonemason for a couple months and then decided I wanted to go back east for the summer because I had a summer job working at [Farm and Wilderness](https://farmandwilderness.org/). Through Christy, I'd gotten a job working as a camp counselor and I love cooking... I love cooking for people. I started at a really early age. I was talking with the cook that it turns out was trying to retire, but hadn't found anybody to take over for him. And so he said, well, if you come back next year, you should be the camp cook. And I was like, I've never cooked for 100 people before... he said, piece of cake, read this book, which was "Great Meatless Meals." And so I did, I ended up cooking. And the great thing about the job, this was at the Saltash Mountain Camp, the great thing about the job is that it was not only cooking for the for the 120 people when they were all in camp, but it was also teaching kids about food and how to cook in the wilderness and how to pack out and plan for meals because it was a hiking camp. And what would happen is cabin groups would go out and hike for four or five days and they'd have to cook their own meals and each cabin group helped me with cooking. And the goal was to get each cabin group able to cook breakfast for the whole camp by the end of the summer.

**Julie Vallimont**

Cool program.

**George Marshall**

Yeah. And so it was great. I didn't really know what I was doing. But I didn't know I didn't know. And so I did it just fine. And I did that for several summers. And then the camp administration decided they wanted to change the whole paradigm of the camp. And the only way to do that was to fire everybody that was there and then rehire other people so that they wouldn't have continuity problems, or they wouldn't have the problem of continuity because they could reinvent themselves entirely. And all through that Farm and Wilderness experience... there were dances that I was calling and music that I was playing with that particular group. But when I came back home, and I wanted to rejoin the band that I had started, which was Swallowtail, they said, well, you're not that great a musician but we hear that you've been doing some calling. And if you want to share the calling responsibility you can rejoin the band. And I thought, oh, and I don't know if they were kidding or not. But it worked out perfectly for me because it meant there were two other callers at the time. So the three of us split the evening calling responsibilities. The calling had always been on the model of the Maine contra dance communities kind of blueprint, which was that the band members would call dances and you take turns playing the music and calling so that no one person had the whole responsibility for the evening.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love that feeling. It feels very folky. It's very genuine.

**George Marshall**

It is a kind of nice way to do it. And so as Swallowtail, we had three callers and we all played, and it worked really well.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who were the starting members of Swallowtail?

**George Marshall**

Well, it's pretty easy because we had this big group of 15. And while I was away for that year, it kind of got pared down to about five people. And so the five people were Tim Van Egmond, who plays hammered dulcimer. He's one of the other callers. Ron Grosslein, who plays fiddle and mandolin, David Cantieni, who plays woodwinds, Timm Triplett, who plays piano. And we also had Ed Mulhern, who played flute and banjo and was one of the other callers and then myself, so there were six of us. And we decided that we would start a second Saturday dance, and so we started up a dance in South Amherst, a monthly dance... and that was great because it gave us something to rehearse toward and have material for and to get a sense of what it was like to organize things and and all of that, and it made it feel more like, you know, we have a hometown dance now. We looked into the possibility of Greenfield, the Guiding Star Grange had become available for dances and we thought about doing something there but the Munson Library [South Amherst] dance at the time, sometimes we'd have twice as many people as really should have been in there dancing. The dancing would be out the door and there'd be another line of people dancing outside the building. It was really, a way successful series. And at that time Applejack was also doing a series of dances and Ralph Sweet started doing it. So going from one dance a month to having now three or four dances, and then the Kaynors started doing dances up in Northfield and Cammy [Kaynor] had a dance in Amherst that he would do regularly as well. So now you could dance three or four nights a week within pretty close areas. So our mission had been successful in creating more dancing in the [Pioneer] Valley.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thank you!

**George Marshall**

It was really, it was a great thing. But you know, I missed my friends on the West coast. And I was really proud of the fact that we'd made a dance band that was actually playing music and dancing, and we'd done a little bit of touring on the East coast. And then I went off, I studied geology when I was in college, and I went to field camp, because when you're getting a geology degree, you need some practical experience of what it's like actually look at rocks out in the field. And the college had shared a facility in Red Lodge, Montana, up in the Flatriron Mountains that they did their summer programs through. So I went up and did that summer program and it was great and I loved being in the West. And I'd heard a rumor that the fellow that had been teaching and running square dances at Yellowstone National Park was retiring that next year, and I thought to myself, ooohh. In Yellowstone Park, they have four beautiful halls that were built for dancing. And now they're not going to have dances anymore and they used to have weekly dances at each of the lodges. And so I contacted the TWA, which is the organization, not the airline, it was the organization that staffed the park with all the park workers and said, hey, we're gonna be touring, we're a square dance band. Do you want us to come and do dances when we're in the area? And they said, yeah, sign us up. We'll have you do four dances. And so all of a sudden, we had a gig in Yellowstone and I wanted to visit my friends in the Northwest. And David's brother lived also in the in the Pacific Northwest and some of his other relatives... our wind player's family was out there. So we decided to put together a tour, a driving tour out to the west coast. Ed Mulhern is a medical doctor and he didn't really want to go on tour. But the rest of us were like, heck yeah, sign us up. So we ended up doing a three week tour where we played across the country. We were in Yellowstone, we stayed there, and we played four dances and had a blast, of course exploring the park during the day and made it out to the west coast and then drove down through California and played there and it was really, it was really fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, sounds amazing. Were you billed as Swallowtail?

**George Marshall**

We were billed as Swallowtail. And then the next year we wanted to do it again but our piano player, Timm Triplett, had written his PhD thesis on the first tour. Like by hand, on pads of paper, and he couldn't face doing the rewrite in the van. And so he said, I'm still your piano player, but I cannot do this tour with you, but you really should do it because it was amazing. And so so we're like, yeah, well, we do need to have a piano player or some kind of rhythm player, because we're a top-heavy band anyway, we have you know, four melody instruments and one rhythm instrument and we really need to find somebody, so I met Ann Percival through her then sweetie. And they were just kind of breaking up. And he was like, you know, Ann is a good piano player, you should consider taking her on tour with you. And we were like, sure. So we started playing some gigs and realized it was a good fit. And then decided to go on tour with with her just that summer. And we made it very clear, you know, this is a temporary gig. We're touring, you know, with you and whatever, and her grandmother gave her $200 and said, you know if it gets bad, missy, just take the bus home. And we were like, okay, so we went on tour and it was great. And it was also really hard. It turns out that changing up from being an all male band to a four guys and a woman changed the dynamics. And there was drama. David was just about to sort of recommit to his relationship and he and Ann got together on the trip. And that caused a lot of heartache. When we came back, David's former girlfriend blamed us for letting him fall in love with somebody else. And it was just tough. We all felt badly and Ann really wanted to keep playing with us and we... you know, we had fun playing with her, she had a whole different approach to the piano. We loved playing with Timm, we loved playing with Ann, we didn't know what to do about that. But Timm, you know, was there first and wanted to continue to do it. And when he wasn't writing his dissertation, he you know, he was all in. So, our fiddler Ron, and his wife were starting to have kids. And so Ann and David and I decided to form a band and play because I could see that I wasn't going to get to do as much of this music and dance stuff is I wanted with Swallowtail only. And so the three of us started and we called ourselves Three Hand Reel. And then we decided that was a little too limiting, so we figured out another name, Wild Asparagus because we were in the Asparagus Valley. So the three of us played together for a while, and then we decided we wanted to go on a 10-week tour. And so we did this 56-gig, 10-week tour navigating the US.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a lot of gigs, George.

**George Marshall**

It's a lot of gigs. And up until that point, I had graduated from college, I didn't want to work for an oil company. And I didn't want to do more school. And so I ended up being the executive chef for the Iron Horse, which is a music cafe in Northhampton.

**Julie Vallimont**

Legendary cafe.

**George Marshall**

And it was the perfect job for me because they only wanted me to work during the week and on the weekends I was free. So I could gig on the weekends and I could work during the week, and it worked out perfectly. But after I did the 10-week tour, that's all I wanted to do. I didn't want to go back to working again, a regular job. It was a great tour, we survived it, we actually thrived and decided to keep going. That was in 1984 that we did that big tour. So then I've really just been doing music and dance ever since then as my main activities.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, that's amazing.

**George Marshall**

So that's a long answer to how we got started.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, you're great at telling stories, George. It amazes me how many memories, you remember so many details of your own life. I was barely in existence when all this was happening and I don't remember most of what I was doing at the time, so well done. So when Swallowtail and Wild Asparagus were starting, were there other contra dance bands? Like were bands a thing, did you have role models for that? Like what made you want to start a band, as opposed to the kind of more pickup style or dance orchestra kind of style?

**George Marshall**

You know, that's a great question, because there were a lot of assumptions that we just took as like, this is how you did things. I think that part of it was that we all came from kind of a classical music background, all the people that were involved with Swallowtail and so, you know, a lot of the power in classical music is not so much the soloists but what happens when you put groups of people together and have an identity. But perhaps it was also due to the the local bands that played in the area... like Applejack, for example, which was a band that played once a month in our area and also in other places and was very involved with the [Chelsea House](https://archivesspace.middlebury.edu/resources/chelsea_house_folklore_center_collection)....Brattleboro music scene. And they considered themselves to be a band. As a dancer, you don't necessarily pay that much attention to who's calling and who's dancing, you're more self-aware or self-conscious or self-absorbed. And so they would announce who the caller was and who the band was but the individuals weren't that highlighted, really, except in the case of sometimes with the callers, that you'd recognize their name because you have to pay attention to them, because they're offering you a lifeline out of chaos. But the bands, you wouldn't necessarily know who's playing there if you're concentrated on your partner. And often there aren't stages, and so the band isn't up where you can see them. And I mean, even to this day it's really funny to hear other band members talk about going into the restroom and having people say, oh, isn't the band great tonight? And, you know, what do you think about them? And they're in the in the stall, and they're hearing people talking about the band and not that they don't know who the members are. They don't recognize them when they come out to wash their hands or whatever.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I'd be on the way back from the restroom back to go on stage and people would ask me to dance on the way back. So I was like, well, I would love to dance, but I have to go do a thing over there, right now, in a few minutes you'll see why I said no. Nothing personal. But that's that's a good thing, right? I mean, most of the time, it means that people are having a good time and enjoying their own experience.

**George Marshall**

It's true and as, as an introvert, I actually love not having that much attention. It sometimes just feels too much. And that an anonymity is really, I find very refreshing of not having to be, you know, the center of attention and yet to be able to help people have a good time. So it is kind of fun to be in an area where I don't know people and get invited to dance when I'm calling. Because I'm out checking sound or coming back from the restroom or whatever. It's a funny thing, like, I'm sorry, I can't, I gotta, you know, I had just called that dance, the dance is still progressing, and I've gone out to listen to sound and somebody just asked me to dance the next one. Okay, that's lovely, but can't do it.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think there's some callers who like, I don't know, I feel like there's a bunch of different personality types. There's people who kind of command the stage with their personality. There's people who see themselves as the people who are running it all. And then there's people who see themselves as facilitators who are just kind of quietly trying to make it happen. And then there's people who want to tell jokes and those people who want to talk as little as possible. Like, what kind of stage persona do you think about having like, what fits your personality?

**George Marshall**

Well, I feel like I'm more like an enzyme really, in that I help catalyze the event. That I help dancers come together with the music and help present an activity that we can all do together and move to the music, which is really what I think about as being... move as a community to the music, because this is community dance. It's not just dancing with one person, it's dancing with everybody in the room, and we're being coordinated by the music and so we're really interacting with the music. So I feel like my role is really just to help facilitate that happen. So I want to try to create a situation where people feel safe. And I don't really feel like I have to entertain them personally, I think that the activity that we're all doing together is perfect entertainment and the music speaks for itself. And what I want to do is I want to present the music and the musicians and the dancers and basically act as an introduction to each other and that we can all work together. One grows to love sound of one's own voice, I suppose sometimes. But my mission is really just to help facilitate the activity. I don't, like, memorize jokes to be able to tell jokes, and I don't try to do stand up comedy or anything like that... I really try to take a backseat to what's happening. But try to create enough structure that people can feel comfortable.

**Julie Vallimont**

And yet you managed to do it with warmth and charm, and humor regardless. It's fun hearing your voice in headphones as we conduct this interview, because I've missed the sound of your voice.

**George Marshall**

Awww, well, thank you.

**Julie Vallimont**

And we, you and Noah and I did that Pacific Northwest tour with you. And just all those hours you spend in the car talking and hearing all your stories. It's really great to hear all that again. It's funny, I think a lot of people have wonderful associations with the sound of your voice. If that's not too weirdly forward to say.

**George Marshall**

I have to say, the activities that give you pleasure, like dancing, there's a lot of things that are associated with that that help build for even a really wonderful experience down the road. So for example, you have a good time dancing one night, and then you go back and you hear the music again, and you dance again. And all the good feelings from last time, kind of help you have a good time this time. And that builds up to a quite a good charge. So everything that you associate, like the sound of a particular band or the sound of a caller or voice or the activity, the repeated activity that you're doing, allemanding or swinging or even just moving to the music It all builds up and creates this wonderful energy and reminiscent. The smells at a dance aren't necessarily that great. It's a little scary to go into a dance in progress or an evening in progress. Sometimes it's like, oh, okay.

**Julie Vallimont**

You just get hit with this wall of humidity and the smell of happy humans in close proximity.

**George Marshall**

it can be you know, it's better not to dwell on that level. But, you know, again, hearing the music, it just brings back the good feelings. And so I'm very happy to be associated with good memories for you and for anybody that has danced with us.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, I think it's like... during this pandemic, it's been months since March, since anyone's danced, really. And yet, every time I go into one of these interviews, we think, how are we going to talk about contra dancing and yet it comes right back, like state-dependent memory, you know, it's totally a thing. And as you start to pull on the threads of these memories, all these sensory experiences come flooding back to me. Which is why I think that our tradition will be fine. You know, it'll be weird for a little while and then we'll get started and then it'll all be in our bones and in our hearts and in our minds. And so I try to encourage myself on the days I feel very sad.

**George Marshall**

I like that perspective a lot. And I agree.

**Julie Vallimont**

So let's geek out about music.

**George Marshall**

Okay.

**Julie Vallimont**

One of the things I'm especially curious to talk to you about is that as a caller and a musician, I imagine you have thoughts about pairing music with dances, or any other thoughts you would like to expound on?

**George Marshall**

Well, I guess the the more that I do things, the less... I come to the realization that the less I know. And so what I try to do is rely on other people more. And I guess the reason I'm saying that is that I can remember years ago, thinking that I knew a whole lot about how to pair music with dancing and what I preferred and all of those kind of things. And I can remember being at gigs and then after the gigs, kind of writing and thinking about what my experience was and how I wished things would get better or would have gone better, ways of improving the experience for everybody, including myself and the musicians and thinking about okay, so how do I codify this? How do I make rules that that make it work? And I've always been really hesitant to direct people to do things in some ways, and that's maybe curious as a caller, because one of the things I do is I direct people to do stuff so that what is in my head can be manifested, in as far as dance choreography goes and what kind of experience people have. But as a caller, I've been more and more reliant on the musicians that I'm working with, to help set the music and pick the tunes for the dances. And my favorite thing is to try to be able to communicate what I'm hoping that the dance will... how it'll make people feel and let the musicians pick the music that they think will work and their agenda can be completely different of mine. I mean, their agenda could be, ooooh we just learned this really cool tune, we think it's going to be fun to dance to, let's do it. This dance sounds like it wouldn't really jeopardize that, like it could work. And I would much rather people play to their, you know, strengths rather than trying to second guess what I'm trying to express, but more to use their enthusiasm for the music that they want to play. It really seems like that is the most successful, because the the most fun I've had calling has been when I am surprised and delighted by how it works out. And if things are too tightly controlled, it doesn't leave any room for that. So I kind of prefer to trust the musicians to share some clues that I have, or some ideas or starting places with musicians. And that could be just showing them the choreography in some cases. In other cases, it could be more guidance, if they want that and letting them run with it and I think that it feels way more successful than it would be if I was trying to micromanage and control it. And actually say, okay, so this is my philosophy about reels or jigs, or I much more want to say something along the lines of, that last dance was really high energy, everybody is a little bit out of breath right now, let's take it down a notch and make them feel really well taken care of and that they're going to be gliding through the next dance with ease and they're going to be able to recharge and be ready for the next time you really want to push them and wind everybody up.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you give that feedback to the band and then they make the right musical choice.

**George Marshall**

That's right. So it is really very much more of a collaborative effort and trying to set up everybody for success, as opposed to directing how things are going to go.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, from my perspective, I've really enjoyed that aspect of working with you, like Buddy System and you, we've worked together a fair amount, especially in recent years. And it's just been so fun, because I think what you're saying about how it's easy to get rigid with your thinking about, well, this kind of tune goes with bouncy dances and this kind of tune goes as smooth dances. But you realize you can have the same dance and put 10 different kinds of music with it and it just brings out different aspects of the same dance. And I love playing with that, now that I've done this a couple times, you know, it's fun to play with that. And you can have a dance and a tune that work amazingly, one night it's magic, the whole hall is on fire. You try to repeat it the next night and it's not the same and you just don't know why. You know, it's like the right mood at the right time and the floor and the people, and so rather than trying to recreate experiences it's all about like, in the moment, what feels inspiring, and I love having that flexibility. I feel like we really create an experience together. It feels very collaborative. And that's really fun.

**George Marshall**

I couldn't agree more. That's really been my experience. And I've really treasured the times I've gotten to work with with you and Noah, in particular because of that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think if we want to create magic, we have to be in the moment. And we have to be with the dancers in that moment, wherever they are, and vice versa. And so, I love that freedom of like, you'll tell us in advance what some of the dances might be, if we ask, so that we could save a set or two that we know might go really well. But we don't have to stick to that. And then we get there and we're like, actually, let's do this other thing instead. And that's really great. Who are some of your inspirations as a caller as you began to learn your craft?

**George Marshall**

Let's see.Well, I have to say that everybody that I've encountered has contributed on my journey. You know, Taylor Whiteside and oh dear, I'm blanking on his name, but I will remember it.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a hot day, it'll come.

**George Marshall**

The Boston area callers, Ted Sannella and Tony Parkes, I danced to pretty regularly. There was a caller, Todd Whittemore, who's just started calling again. He wasn't calling much when I first met him, but then he ended up calling a bunch and also starting a very successful dance series in the Boston area. Tod Whittemore. I met Ralph Page early on and he taught me one of the most profound lessons about calling, really ever, it was a kind of a landmark experience. Ralph Page was semi-retired when I met him. I didn't go to any of his regular summer dances. But the organizers in Boston, some of the organizers, the Taylors were folk dance instructors. [Marianne... and I can't remember her husband's name](http://www.facone.org/about-our-founders.html) at the moment but anyway, they organized a big special dance for Ralph Page and it seemed like there were over 100 squares in the room. It was a huge, huge gathering. And they'd talked it up over months. And it was it was like, okay, this is the great Ralph Page, you know, the fellow that kind of bridged between the old days and modern contra dancing and square dancing. And I'd really love to experience that. At that time I was in high school and I'd just been dancing... I think it was actually the year after the summer I went dancing. And I had just learned how to do a Swedish-style hold, turning dance hold, swing, where you put your hand around the waist of the person you're dancing with, and then you take the free hand. So the right hand is around the waist of your partner. The left hand is underneath the hands, and it's very solid hold and it's used for swinging really, really fast. And somebody had just showed me that hold and I was like, ooh, this is really cool. It feels like I'm in a helicopter, you know, buckled in and safe and I can really do this. And we were in a square formation and I wasn't really listening to the caller much because he was still organizing and calling for squares and for people to join squares, and my square mates were like, oh, show us what you're doing there. And so I was demonstrating how to do the swing and I you know, this was somebody that had been dancing for only like three or four or five months. And I was so proud that I had something that people wanted to know about and to share because I definitely have the know-it-all gene, plus self-esteem, so I'm happy to share what I know... or what I don't really actually know. Ralph stopped the whole dance and said, "Young man, don't do that!" And I was like, oh, okay. And what I didn't realize was that some years before, a very strong large lumberjack was swinging with a very small, slight woman in that hold, using that hold, and he swung really fast and then let go and she flew across the room and broke her leg.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, my goodness.

**George Marshall**

And so the rule was, you didn't do that swing at Uncle Ralph's dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**George Marshall**

And I didn't know that because I had just started. And the organizers came over to me and said, you just disrupted the whole night. If you ever do that again... if you ever do this again you will be banned from dancing in Boston. I was crushed. I would have left the dance right then except my square mates said oh, don't worry about them. They're, they're old. They're gonna die soon. They're just, you know, don't pay any attention to it. You know, we asked you to do it, sorry you got in trouble and whatever, don't worry about it. You'll enjoy dancing in Boston for many years. And so I took them at their face value, and I didn't quit dancing. But what I did learn was the power that the caller has to call people out. And that it really isn't fair, there were so many other ways that that could have been handled. I also realized that when you're as old as Ralph was at that time and had been doing something for so long, and your identity is so tied up with it, that sometimes you forget the power that you wield. And so it was a really good lesson to me in the dynamics of and the responsibilities that one has as a caller to keep people safe. Even if it's from yourself and for calling people out. And, you know, it's true that I could have been engaging in a dangerous activity, but we weren't swinging that fast. You know, in retrospect, it would have been much better just to send somebody over to the square and say, hey, pay attention to what the caller is saying. Instead of, you know, calling me out like that. So, I learned a whole lot about that from that experience. One of the things about being a caller is that you know, there may be multiple band members, but there's usually only one caller at a time. So of course, my fellow callers, Tim Van Egmond, and other dance weekends that I've been at where there have been other callers... I've really learned from everybody. You know, imitation is really flattery. It's a great flattery. And when I saw stuff that would work, I'd happily take it on and try it out and see if that was something that would work. One of the things that happened when we went on our ten week tour, is we played in Brasstown, North Carolina and after we played that evening dance, they invited us back the next year to participate in their winter dance week. And at the winter dance week they hired us to be the program directors for the next year. And as part of the tours that we did with Swallowtail we met a fellow, Frank Hall, in Bloomington, Indiana, who was one of the program directors for Country Dance and Song Society, so he hired Swallowtail to come and teach at Pinewoods the following summer. And so we started getting... we were, you know, a young band and we were starting to get invited to dance weekends and that sort of thing. And then another weekend that we got invited to play for as Swallowtail was the Augusta dance weekend and [Larry Edelman](https://squaredancehistory.org/exhibits/show/brasstown-interviews/larry-edelman---biography), who was organizing that weekend, and I would say that he's probably one of the most influential callers that I encountered, because he really was a teacher of whatever he does. In his non-dancing life he works as a trainer and trains people how to do things. Not kind of like a lion tamer, but maybe a little bit like it.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's an applicable skill for calling.

**George Marshall**

I would think so. But he really had his processes down and learning how to teach. And so, you know, watching him, how we organize the dance week and those things. Larry Edelman definitely was one of my calling heroes. The other thing that was happening too is that I encountered vintage dancing at the time. And unfortunately I'm blanking on his last name.

**Julie Vallimont**

We can look some of these up later and share them in the podcast notes.

**George Marshall**

That would be wonderful.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, no pressure. It is still hot.

**George Marshall**

The Cincinnati vintage dance community did a week-long dance camp for vintage dancing, like how to do — and they defined vintage dancing as sort of everything between before the 1900s or early 1900s. And I remember his name, [Richard Powers](http://richardpowers.com/), he founded the [Cincinnati vintage dance scene](http://vintagedance.net/). He was a fabulous graphic artist and really had broad vision. And so part of the vintage dancing is all the trappings that go with it. So like, dressing up in period costume and creating balls and events. And he was really into it, and teaching, and he really knew how to teach couple dancing really well. I'm still blown away by how good he is at breaking things down and teaching stuff. And he moved from Cincinnati to California to teach at The University of California and has since written some books on... he's really enamored with waltz as well as other couple dances. And he's written a wonderful book on waltzing and philosophy. And it's a great read. But I look at calling, that there's the teaching, or presenting a dance, getting people to learn how to do it, as one component, and then another component is the actual calling of the dance while the music is going on. And then of course, the third component is how you create a space where that can all happen. The dance organization part of things. And as far as teaching people how to dance and how to move through space, and to music, I have to say that Richard Powers is the most influential on what I've been doing and learning. He did it so well and does it so well that it just takes my breath away when I get to be around him. And it was so, so inspiring and encouraging.

**Julie Vallimont**

What were some of the specific things that you learned from him?

**George Marshall**

I think the mechanics of teaching people how to move, and also how to... we have... often we have images of ourselves of what our abilities are and how to do things. I often think of contra dancing as being kind of a gateway drug kind of experience.

**Julie Vallimont**

To other kinds of dancing?

**George Marshall**

To other kinds of dancing. You start as being, I'm not a dancer, but I think I can do this because it's a highly directed activity. I don't have to come up with anything on my own. I'm just told what I have to do.

**Julie Vallimont**

They say if you can walk you can contra dance. Right?

**George Marshall**

Exactly. And you know square dancing, similar kind of thing. So I think contra dancing helps create the idea that you actually are a dancer, that you can dance. That dancing is part of your DNA. And one of the things that I learned from Richard is that you can trick people into doing stuff. You can distract them so that they can actually get over themselves to do things.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, get them out of their heads.

**George Marshall**

Or get them so into their heads that they forget that they can't do something. So it creates a space where you can get out of your own way. And so the things that he has figured out, how to hold people's attention what to have focus attention on. Because movement is such a complicated thing. I mean, think about it... as a as a kid, the hardest thing that you learn how to do is probably walk, or certainly when you're a child, you are the smartest you will ever be in your life. Like you are able to learn things faster than you ever can do any other time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Your neurons are very plastic.

**George Marshall**

They are. And so I think that to be able to help people return to that and have that childlike approach to learning things is really valuable. And he was able to set things up so that even people who you wouldn't be able to say, you wouldn't judge, like if you were judging somebody else, which of course, none of us ever do. Look at somebody and say, oh, they're not really a dancer. Somebody that has been judged as not a dancer can actually move and dance. But getting back to my original point, which was that any kind of movement is really complex. And if you focus on what you're trying to do, you probably won't succeed. It's better that if you can use the skills that you've developed in other areas, and focus on something else, and then you'll just be able to do it. And so the ability to distract people, so that the stuff that they already know can come out and help them in their journey was again something that Richard seemed to be really good at being able to set people up for success for learning things. And whether it's learning a long tango sequence and how he presented like, things like teaching the end of the dance first, like working at the final goal and then working backwards and adding on more and more so that you don't just practice the beginning of the dance a million times and then get the end and now the end is the weakest part because you've worked on it the least. But instead, building up success — and that translates into learning music too — is that often if you learn the tune from the the end moving forward. Sorry, I didn't say that right. If you learn the end of the tune first so that you can finish strong, then you keep adding more and more to the tune so that when you start, the weakest link is really the beginning. And once you get going, then you can finish which encourages you to go back to the beginning. So the beginning can come stronger. And sort of that as a model for learning a new dance or a new activity.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thinking about where you're going and having that in mind is helpful. So, let's talk about music. I mean, you have the interesting perspective of having been a member of the dance community for a long time now, both with a strong local presence and a strong national presence. You know, there are some musicians or colleagues who mostly travel around nationwide, or who mostly call locally but you kind of do both. You've had a very active busy home in Greenfield for decades now with [your regular Wild Asparagus dance](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-RzSdjufnA) and other dances in the area. And you also call at dance weekends all over the country. And you were one of the people who kind of helped create the nationwide scene that we have now. So what are your thoughts? That's a giant question, George, summarize the last 30 years for us in some coherent way, please. But what are your thoughts about how the dancing has changed and what you've seen? And I don't know you could talk about any kinds of things. Where is music going? Where's dancing going? What have you noticed change?

**George Marshall**

Wow, I'm feeling a little overwhelmed.

**Julie Vallimont**

Okay, we can break it down.

**George Marshall**

I think we might have to. I think we might have to break it down a little bit into smaller steps.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes. You have 30 seconds to answer, by the way. [laughing]

**George Marshall**

I love the idea of the question. But it feels too big, I don't know where to start. So try again.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you've seen things on a local scale with running the Greenfield regular dance like the Wild Asparagus dance, and being a caller at many other dances in the region. And, you know, you also were one of the people who started this movement towards dance weekends and tours. And what was that like starting, you know, being one of the first bands who was traveling a lot, and you've created a lot of events... like, you're like, I want to go out to the Pacific Northwest, so I'm gonna help start a dance weekend there. And what...how did that all come about?

**George Marshall**

I think that the same motivation that that that I felt when I went off to college from getting to dance, you know, five or six, seven nights week, to an area that had once a month. I was desperately wanting to make stuff happen. And it seemed like if it wasn't happening, then the thing to do is to help create it. And I think that the touring came also out of that, and then the creation of dance weekends. I attended a lot of dance weekends, the Cincinnati all throughout what I was doing. I was going to many as many events and dances as I could because I really, I love the dancing part of things. I mean, if I had to choose between playing music and calling and dancing, I would definitely take the dancing part first. That's the most important thing to me. If for whatever reason I couldn't call or I couldn't play music...the thing that I would really miss is the ability to to dance. So I went to a lot of events, I went to events on the West Coast when I heard about dance weeks or weekends out there, I would go in the Midwest and up and down the East coast. I really tried to go to as many events as possible and I spent a bunch of time working with Jay Ungar and Molly Mason at their Ashokan events. They really throw a great party.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, they do.

**George Marshall**

And it was really wonderful to get to spend time with them, and I did all sorts of things, I performed at their events. I also worked as crew chief on their crew. I have done some food work with them.

**Julie Vallimont**

Jay and Molly know both how to throw a good party and also how to build community.

**George Marshall**

They do.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it's a really nice combination.

**George Marshall**

It was something that I really looked very hard at, at successful. Sort of out of that desire, Ann and David and I put together [a weekend called Dance-A-Rama](https://www.dancearama.org/) which we actually have restarted in the Northwest. Our first one was this past November. But we'd mothballed it for several years because we couldn't find a facility on the East coast. But we did it for many years here in Connecticut and in Massachusetts also. The motivation for putting on weekend events as opposed to one night stands is that there's a whole different level of community that can be generated when you're with somebody for a week or for for a weekend, than you can just in an evening dance and that connection just felt and feels so good. I really love organizing things and events and helping create that community. It's when I feel like I'm really answering my calling, as it were, that my mission, it just resonates. I love feeling fully utilized and I love being able to use all the stuff that I've learned over the years to be able to create things... and the week long dance camps that I do, that's really what I'm passionate about. It is just so much fun to be able to create that. And bring value to to all the participants, including musicians and the dancers and the local community, but the whole thing... it just feels to me, it's what I absolutely love doing. But going back to your question about, you know what it felt like at the time. It really was just to create more of what we love doing. And it was one step at a time it was really putting one foot in front of the other with no plan about where we're going. Unfortunately, or fortunately, there was no destination in mind. It was really just, this is the next step. We could put a dance weekend together, there's not too many right now. We can make that happen. Or my friends for example, what started the [St. Croix dance weeks](http://www.tropicaldancevacation.com/) was a couple of friends of mine were moving back to St. Croix. And they were going to miss dancing and I got excited about having a winter vacation for the band, being able to afford to do something like that. And so we created the event around that. And then it got totally out of control.

**Julie Vallimont**

Out of control, meaning very successful?

**George Marshall**

Well, you know, it started with my talk with my friends saying, you know, what is it going to be like to be on St. Croix and have no contra dancing, you clearly love it. They said, oh, well, you should come down and do a dance. And I was like, okay, but like who knows how to contra dance on St. Croix? And they said, well, we have maybe 30 friends, we've got a nice artists community that would come out and do it. And, you know, we get about 40 or 50 people to come out and see weekly movies that we project onto a sheet, you know, tied to the side of a building, and I bet people would want to come and dance. And I was like, yeah, that's sounds okay. I don't know how I could bring a band and do that. But at that point, there was no consideration about using recorded music for contra dancing. That was like, the the last thing in my mind, you know, it had to be live music, because it was such a important part of my reality.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**George Marshall**

So I went to a music party a couple weeks later, and said, you know, I'm thinking we've been doing this Dance-A-Rama thing this weekend, but I'm thinking about doing a winter dance retreat on St. Croix and three people handed me deposits and I was like, wait a minute, I don't know if it's gonna happen. I don't know how it's gonna work. And they said, no, no, we know you, George, you're gonna make it happen and we want to be there. It's a great idea and you're going to need some money to get it going. And so, here, you know, take the deposits and use them to get going on this. And we know that if it doesn't happen, you're going to give us our money back. And I was like, oh, well, this could work. So I planned an event with my friends in St. Croix for 80 people and 150 people signed up. And it was like, okay. Yes, this was 26 years ago. That was like, okay, this is this is gonna work. And people went and had a fantastic time. The first year, the learning curve was really steep. I went down to St. Croix the day before all the guests arrived. And we carried our sound system down. Each band member took a piece of the sound system with them as checked bags. Because my friends weren't really connected with like, they didn't know anybody in St. Croix who had a sound system. I mean, even a piano, we had to bring our own piano with us. We didn't know anything about that. And then we went back home the same day that everybody else was going home, as well. So it was really just like, we're all going down there. We're doing it and then we're coming back. And things happened along the way. I mean, the big thing that first year was that the hotel that my friends had booked, didn't actually have room for the 80 people, let alone the 150 people that signed up. And so it was several months that we had nowhere to stay and it was only through luck and connections with people that were actually outside the dance community. I encountered a woman who brought college swim teams down to the Caribbean for two weeks at a time. And she had a whole circuit of islands that she had hotels lined up that they could go to. So this college swim team would fly there, and they would swim in the local pool for training for two weeks in the Caribbean in the middle of the winter, and then they'd go back to college. So it's like a little break for them. And it turns out she wasn't using this facility on St. Croix, the time that we wanted to do it, and so she said, sure, I'll set you up with this. And so we ended up having a place to stay.

**Julie Vallimont**

What year was this? This was a while ago, right? And that kind of story is that, like you have many stories like that of starting both your events in Hawaii and in St. Croix, right. It's like oh, using your people skills and really meeting people in the community and trying to figure on how to get this done. It's really a community event. You have to make connections.

**George Marshall**

That's part of what I love is just the fact is just trying to create something out of nothing. And I feel so fortunate that I've had that opportunity. And it's, you know, bless those little instruments and the places they've taken us to the music and the dance have really created lovely, lovely experiences all around.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, a lot of memories from a lot of people. It's really wonderful.

**George Marshall**

So, getting back to the music question, that you asked earlier about how things have changed. One of the challenges for me is that wherever we have gone, because I do work with with Buddy System whenever I can, and several other bands. Most of my experience has been working with either Swallowtail or Wild Asparagus. And really predominantly Wild Asparagus, because that's the been the band that has been touring the most heavily, is that the way we play music creates a way of dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Ah, this is a pet theory of mine! I've been trying to get it in all these episodes and you just said it without me even asking you! Please, say more George!

**George Marshall**

Well, so, we are creating our own reality in that because of the way we play the music, because of the rhythms that we use and the tunes that we're picking and how we're presenting it and how I present the dances in the context of the music. One question that people ask me a lot is how is dancing different in different parts of the country and I say, from my perspective, it's all the same.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because you're facilitating it.

**George Marshall**

Because we're making a thing happen that is all the same all over, and people are reacting to it in the same way because it seems like we've tapped into kind of this core co-creation, and people tend to react to it the same way. I mean, there's slight differences, like a little bit of terminology, or how people, say, promenade with their hand up or down, that sort of thing or things that are... there's a few little differences but as a caller and as musician, people are reacting to us in the same way. And so it doesn't feel that different. In order to answer that question, I would have to be more of somebody that is going and visiting dance communities with the bands that are playing for them. I notice that when I'm working with Buddy System that people also dance, they dance differently to Buddy System than they do to Wild Asparagus, for example. And there's a greater difference between how people dance to Buddy System or the Clayfoot Strutters or really any of the other bands, musicians. Everybody's creating their own thing. And people are reacting to the music and dancing differently. And it's, it's pretty much all great. But in order to see how people are dancing differently, you have to have different music and different callers. And so it's hard for me to say how things have changed. It would be more me talking about how our music has changed, perhaps, and then how people are reacting differently to it. And it's very hard for me to say that because I'm not dancing to us, I'm calling to us. And I'm noticing — and also, because we've been doing it for so long, it means that people come to our dances that aren't necessarily regular dancers anymore, because the life pcycle of a dancer is that you dance for a while and then maybe really get into it and you dance a whole lot and then you kind of taper off and do other things and you might come back if you recognize the caller or the band or you just "get a wild hair" and you went, oh I remember contra dancing. And so we've kind of trained people as we've learned as we've gone along. And so if you go to a Wild Asparagus dance, say, in Colorado, there are a lot of people that come up to me all the time at the dance, say, I haven't seen this many people for years. Like, people I haven't seen for 10, 15, 20 years who came out because you guys are here. And they remembered having a great time dancing 25 years ago, and now they're here dancing to you now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it becomes an event like a reunion.

**George Marshall**

Yeah. And so it's a special party.

**Julie Vallimont**

It pulls on all those memories, like you're talking about before it. Memories of good experiences that they had in the past.

**George Marshall**

Yeah. I mean, it takes a lot for people to get away from the TV or the comfort of their home, especially as you're aging. That's just, it's like, you know, you have distractions, kids and families and other pursuits. I mean, there's so much to do in the world, that it's amazing that people choose to include dancing as much as they do. And I'm supremely grateful for that. But it's really hard for me to say how things are changing. And also, when we were... in the last number of years, we've been doing about 100 dates a year. And that's a lot of time. And so it's hard. I still really make a priority to go to other people's events and to go to other dance camps, because I want to see what folks are doing and how it is. And I want to learn from them. And I also want to remind myself why I do what I'm doing. Because when I'm in the middle of it, it's really hard work. I never really think about it so much but afterwards, looking back at what was necessary to make it happen. It's a lot of work. And so I can sometimes lose sight in the amount of work it is to make it happen and what people are who are experiencing the fruits of those labors get to enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right. Hosting the party feels very different than going to the party.

**George Marshall**

Exactly. So I want to go to the party, so that I can remember why it's worth doing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Why the party is fun.

**George Marshall**

Yes. And so, I do, you know, like, I go to dance events and evening dances, and I have a fabulous time and I love the dancing and I love the people. And it's like, yes, this is the value. This is why it's worth it to work that hard or to do what we're doing. Because if these folks can create it for me, then I can help create it for other people, too.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you can learn just what other people are up to and see what else is going on when you're not facilitating the music and the calling for the night. I think, you know all callers and musicians, not all of them are dancers but it's good to get back out there and feel the joy.

**George Marshall**

I agree.

**Julie Vallimont**

Put your foot in the pool.

**George Marshall**

So I have a really hard time answering your question because I don't get to spend as much time listening to other bands and how they're presenting their music and what's happening at local dances when we aren't there.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a really good answer, in a sense. Let me ask you a slightly different question, then. When you're calling with different bands and you notice different reactions on the dance floor... like, what are some of the differences that you see and how do you think that connects to the music?

**George Marshall**

Well, I have to say I've been really fortunate, in that I've gotten to the point in my career where I can pretty much pick and choose who... or at least I have veto power over who I get to work with, which is nice so that I try to set things up for success. And work with folks that I really feel connect to the dancers. What I've observed is that musicians that play to the dance choreography and to the dancers seem to be the most successful. So for example, Wild Asparagus, we're always looking at the dancers, and we are playing the music to fit the choreography and fit what the dancers are doing. And our experience is that when the dancers aren't reacting to what we're doing, then we try to find ways to get their attention and help them listen to the music and react to the music. And the feeling that is so satisfying, when, for example, the balancing is really coordinated, or you can feel the whole room moving together with the music. It's just really gratifying. And so that provides immense motivation to try to figure out how to make that happen. And we do it on an individual basis. We also do it as a band. Individually, we're watching the dancers and we're playing to them. And sometimes that can backfire when things happen on the dance floor that are really distracting, you know somebody falls or something happens in another part of the room, a table collapses or whatever... it can be really jarring and take us all out of that thing, but watching the dances and reacting to it and getting people to dance together seems to be a really critical thing. [You and Noah as Buddy System](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mCc55ocWec) when you're dancing, I really feel that you guys are right on top of what's happening. I think that you're paying attention to what the dancers are doing and playing to the to the choreography. I don't really know, it could also be that your music is so compelling that people are reacting to it. I wouldn't be surprised if you were to say, oh no, we're not paying attention to dancers at all. We're just playing music and the dancers are reacting to it, but I don't really believe that you would say that. I would love to know sometime....

**Julie Vallimont**

We watch them, spoiler alert, we watch them pretty constantly.

**George Marshall**

I don't see how you could do it otherwise and be as effective as you are.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's more than watching them, we feel them. It's like, it's like using your... my riding instructor used to call it soft eyes. You're using your peripheral vision to just feel what's happening on the dance floor. If we're not looking at them, we might be having our eyes closed, but we're feeling what's going on out there.

**George Marshall**

Right. It's the whole thing. I mean, you're feeling the vibrations in the room, you're listening to the sound in the room. It's coming back to you and it creates that feedback that you need in order to be reactive. The really great bands, or the great dance experiences I've had, the great calling experiences have been when I've been working with people that actually are able to tune in to what's going on on the floor and bring people along with that. There was a dance community, which I'm not going to name because I would love to call and play for them again sometime. We joke that... Ann Percival in Wild Asparagus loves to scrapbook and to write down stories and journal. And I hope that someday that her journal writings will be able to be published. But long ago, we decided that it would probably have to be posthumously. Because, of course, what you focus on are the, you know, the disasters, the bad things that have happened. Not necessarily all the time, but they're a lot more like, oh, no, you can't believe this happened kind of story than, oh, that was such a wonderful experience kind of thing. We were in this dance community and we were playing for them and the community pretty much, they only danced contra dancing to old time music. And so they were used to dancing a lot faster than what we were used to playing. And the beat was different. And the music that they were playing, my judgement of it, in retrospect was that the music was being played so fast, that the dancers couldn't keep up with it. And so they weren't really dancing in time with the music. And we noticed that people were not dancing in time on our music. And it was really frustrating. It felt like a total disconnect and it was horrible. And we were not able to force them to follow us. So, after the third dance, and the band was like looking at me going, like, what are we doing? We can't do another two hours, or two and a half hours of this, it's just like... we're banging our heads against the wall. And so I said, okay, I'm going to teach all of you how to call. And so what I did was I gave the whole hall, like all 150 people a lesson in how to call a contra dance. So, in my mind, in order to call a contra dance, you have to listen to the music and be able to hear where the phrases is. And so what I did was I had the dancers be the band and count to eight, because in my mind, what a contra dance band is is an eight count generator. And so, what the band does, is basically does 12345678 over and over again, and the dancers... you know, a contra dance is also 64 beats long, the way that it's being done these days. And so you've got, you know, eight groups of eight. And that's how the phrasing and you know, where the beginning and the start and a really great band will be able to play in such a way that the phrasing is really clear. So you don't have to think about it. You don't have to count along. But what I did is, as I taught everybody that okay, so as a caller, you need to tell people the information they need to know, before they have to do it. Otherwise, it's like being an a driver in Boston, where you use your turn signal to indicate a successfully completed maneuver as opposed to a predictive event.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right.

**George Marshall**

So for example, in Boston when you're driving, you'll see many cars that will make a right hand turn and then they'll turn on their flashers after they've made the turn. Like I meant to do that.

**Julie Vallimont**

And with calling you really have to anticipate the call and so you're teaching them to be more aware of the music in order to do that.

**George Marshall**

Yes. And not all callers do that. Some are more in the congratulatory "yes, actually you were supposed to be doing that then!" kind of mode of calling, but most callers strive to let people know ahead of time what they're doing. So in order to do that, if you're going to start the movement on count one, the calls happen on count seven and eight. So I had all the dancers count to eight, and I called the calls on seven and eight. And then I had all the dancers call the calls and seven, eight, I counted one to eight, over and over again. And then I had the band sneak in and start playing. And the rest of the night everybody danced right on time, it was just like what we wanted to do. And I didn't call the dancers out and say, you guys don't know how to dance to our music. Basically, what I did is I set them up for success, and I'm glad it worked. And over the years, I've done that in various places, if it really starts... like we're feeling out of control or or not connecting, and it has worked. It's one of those things where you can only do it really once. But luckily, you know, we don't encounter that situation where people are not able to dance to our music because they're just not familiar with what we're doing or can't hear it or have been trained not to react to the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

So it sounds like if I were to ask you what you think is great contra dance music even before we started talking about genre, some of the answers might be that it's well phrased, and that it's responsive to the dancers. What other things would you add?

**George Marshall**

I think that it would be exciting to dance to, and that it would be enticing to listen to.

**Julie Vallimont**

[Jokingly] Also fun, okay, fine...

**George Marshall**

And so, that means that sometimes the dancers have to make an effort to listen. So that would be using things like dynamics and arrangements to capture people's attention. And again, bring them out of themselves to the whole room. I think the dancers go through kind of an evolution. When you first start dancing, you feel very self-centered, you're concerned about whether you're going to embarrass yourself, or you're worried about whether you know how to do it or not, or like, learn it. And so you're really only thinking about yourself, it's all me, me, me me all the time. And then after a while, after you become more confident and conversant in the language and terminology, you can think about accommodating your partner and helping your partner succeed. And then after that you're working on helping your partner having a great time and yourself, you can start thinking about the other couple that you're working with, or if you're going outside that group of four, the set, and eventually you become tuned into the whole set that you're dancing with. And then if you can expand further than that to the whole room. And then of course, the next step is like the universe. It's like, you know, just vibrating with everything. And what the band can do to help give you a transformative experience is to bring you out of yourself and be able to hear and feel what's happening. Enlarge your senses, your sphere of influence, as it were. And so, you know, I can think of some moments that really... like right now what I'm thinking back to is working with you guys at Falcon Ridge. The last time we worked together and how, at one point you really deconstructed the music down to just a few notes on the piano, like, Noah wasn't even playing. It was just you, just a few notes... like not even harmonizing, but a single melody line. And not even the melody of the tune, but more a hint, and people were riveted to that. They were listening so hard and dancing with each other so well and that you took them out of... now instead of being distracted by the music, you were able to actually quiet them to get to the point and then the excitement of when it built back up. And to be able to take on a journey of going from this really minimalistic thing that just barely had enough repetition to be able to tie into the repetitive nature of the movements and the feelings of experiencing the dance. To then being awash in the flood of all the notes and the music and the textures of the violin and the the the piano interacting with the other with one's journey, it was so exciting. It was like, goosebumps, and you could just feel the energy in the room just moving in waves. And for me, those peak experiences are kind of what... they're like, the reward for anything that could be hard about it, or it's just that those are the moments that it's like, okay, right place, right time. Right people, right moment.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, it's interesting because you know, I can't dance anymore and I used to dance a lot. Like many callers and dancers, I was a dancer first for many years before I started playing. And I had to go through this little period of like, grieving that when I couldn't dance, and then people ask me, isn't it weird to be a dance musician if you can't dance? But when it gets like that I am dancing with them. You know, like it's a different kind of connection where you feel the music in your body and you look out on the floor and you can feel what people are doing. And so that's when it's magical. It's like we really are all dancing together. It helps if you have a fiddler who puts out crankin' foot percussion. It's just irresistible. But that kind of awareness you're talking about for dancers, you know, all of us need to have it. Like I've always called it spheres of awareness, without thinking too much about what I call it, but it's like, when you're a new musician, you're just trying to get the motor patterns of the tune out, right? Before you can even think about your bandmates, and then you can think about your bandmates. And then you have to do that before you can even think about improvising together and then the caller is a whole other layer of awareness that you have to add. And then finally the dancers, and it's not until you can master all those things that you can really put your awareness out onto the dance floor. And so I like the thought of dancers seeing it as a goal to eventually be able to put their awareness throughout the whole floor while they're dancing. Because that's really where the magic is. Sure, you can have fun flourishes with your partner. But that's like a spice. That's not the whole point in contra dancing. There are many other kinds of dancing where flourishes are the point, salsa, or, you know, many other kinds of couple dances. Maybe I sound curmudgeonly, but I'm very opinionated about that.

**George Marshall**

Well, I'm with you. I agree. I'm definitely on board.

**Julie Vallimont**

And those are just the most magical moments. Well, George it's been so wonderful to talk with you today. Is there any last thing that you would like to add?

**George Marshall**

No, I think that we've really done a nice range of... talked about a lot of different topics. And it's fun to be able to tell the stories and think about, because it brings me back to the moments that have those wonderful experiences, so thank you.

**Julie Vallimont**

So wonderful to talk with you. Thank you very much, George.

**George Marshall**

It's been a pleasure.