Contra Pulse Episode 14 – Mary Cay Brass

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra Pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. Today we talk with pianist, accordionist, and singer Mary Cay Brass. She has played in bands that were mainstays of the New England contra scene in the last decades. Such bands as the Greenfield Dance Band and Airdance as well as many other projects. Mary Cay began her involvement with traditional music at the age of nine when her Croatian neighbors invited her to join a children's folk dance troupe. In the 1970s she spent two and a half years in the former Yugoslavia, studying traditional song and dance on a Fulbright scholarship. After that, she moved to New York City, where she picked up an old accordion from a Swedish accordion collector in Minneapolis, and began a lifelong love of that instrument as an accompaniment to the songs of Eastern Europe. At the same time, she was introduced to the country dance musical traditions of New England, and began passionately learning everything she could about the piano backup traditions to fiddle tunes, as well as learning the tunes on accordion. This led to a move to Southern Vermont in 1984, where she became part of a thriving traditional music scene, forming the Greenfield Dance Band with fiddler David Kaynor and bassist Stuart Kenny and later guitar and mandolin player Peter Siegal. Mary Cay began playing regularly in Greenfield and throughout the country at dances, festivals, and camps. She has numerous recordings with fiddlers Rodney Miller, Sarah Blair, Becky Tracy, David Kaynor, and others.

On both piano and accordion she has the rhythmic drive and energy that make her a much sought after musician. Mary Cay worked for more than eight years as a classroom music teacher in public and private schools in Southern Vermont. And she worked with the New England Dancing Masters as an artist-in-residence in New England schools, working thematically with teachers to create programs of songs and folk dances. Mary Kay has also led village harmony camps for teens and adults for 30 years, a singing camp that focuses on traditional singing for many cultures, and she leads to highly successful community choirs.

It was truly a pleasure to speak with her on Contra Pulse. In our interview, we talked about her early days getting started playing for contras. Her experiences as a contra musician over several decades, her piano style and influences and her passion for the music of Quebec and New England. In addition to numerous other styles. The opening track you're hearing is from the Greenfield Dance Band’s album High Clouds. Later in the episode, we'll hear music from air dance and from her solo album Green Mountain.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hello, Mary Cay Brass. Welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Thank you. Thank you for inviting me.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a beautiful September day. Kind of warm. We had that little cold snap. And now it's back in the 70s again.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, it's gorgeous. The colors were amazing driving down here.

**Julie Vallimont**

Are you coming from a little bit north of here?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, Athens [Vermont].

**Julie Vallimont**

Have your fall colors started already?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah. Beautiful.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, we're just getting a little hints of it here. I think that last weekend really started it off. And there are trucks that go by because it's a Friday and people are working. So we'll just ignore them. People are getting used to the weird sounds on my porch in these interviews.

**Mary Cay Brass**

That's fine.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I'm so grateful to have you here. I haven't seen you for quite some time. But you were really the person that I learned contra piano from the most when I was first starting out.

**Mary Cay Brass**

I didn't even know that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was kind of stealthy about it. But in 2008, you did a piano class at Pinewoods at American Week. And I went to that, and that was like a couple years before that I had started kind of playing contra piano, like a couple of my friends kind of gently pushed me into it. But I didn't know what I was doing and I really wanted to learn. And then I saw this opportunity and that was the first time I ever went to Pinewoods and you were there and I just, I soaked up every single thing you said that week, I recorded the whole thing. I took it home and I transcribed it. So if you ever want an extremely detailed transcription of your week-long workshop I can totally give you all my notes.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Wow. No, I had no idea. But I do remember that. I remember you being there. But I didn't realize you transcribed every word.

**Julie Vallimont**

You never know do you? Well, do you want to tell us a little bit about how you got started playing for contras and your musical background?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, well, I was originally really, really involved in a lot of Eastern European music and folk dance. I first actually heard about contra dance music... and I didn't actually even realize that there was a dance idiom that went with the music, but I was in North Carolina, riding in a friend's car, in the backseat in the days when people had cassettes. And somebody put on a cassette of the [Canterbury Country [Dance] Orchestra](http://laufman.org/index.php/canterbury-orchestra/) and I'd never heard of them. I didn't know what this music was. But I was really taken with the piano playing, which was, of course, Bob McQuillen. I just said to my friends, right at that moment, it was like one of those prophetic things I just said, I'm gonna learn to do this. And I'm gonna get good at it. I was just inspired, I guess. And I asked my friends to make me a copy of that tape. So they did, reel to reel tape. I brought it home to New York City where I was living. And I had a friend who was... we were also both learning accordion at that time. And I gave her the cassette and I said, here, learn this one tune. I'm going to try to figure out the piano part to this one tune and I remember the tune was Coleraine, the jig. I went measure by measure, I didn't play by ear at this point, I only read music. I kind of believed there were two kinds of people, people who read music and people who just naturally somehow know how to play by ear. And I was not that, but I really wanted to learn this style and there was no way to learn it except by ear. So I just went measure by measure and I started with the left hand. I mean, I can remember to this day exactly what Mac was doing on that tune because I just absorbed that tune. And then I went on to another tune on that tape and my friend Vicki, I would learn another accordion tune. And then I would learn to back that up and sort of really slowly and I really didn't even know what the dance tradition was because I was really involved in folk dancing in New York City and the folk arts organization that I was involved with put on live music once a month, I think and it would be from different traditions. Greek one month, and Macedonian and Albanian, and one month it was contra dancing. And it was Tod Whittemore and Andy Davis and Rodney Miller. I didn't know any of these people. I stood the whole time behind Andy, like, glued to his hands, like watching what they did and and he noticed me finally said something like, are you a piano player? And I said, 'Yeah, I'm just trying to learn this style of piano.' So it turned out, we ended up making a date for him to come to my apartment and give me a lesson. And that was kind of my first lesson, and I recorded everything and learned everything that he taught me in that lesson. Yeah, so that was the beginning.

**Julie Vallimont**

Isn't that funny that you just hear something and you just know in that moment that you want to do it? And then you do it.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, there haven't been too many things in my life where it's been that clear that it was not even, like, something to think about. You know, it was just like, I'm going to do this.

**Julie Vallimont**

Were you a contra dancer before that?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Oh, no, that was my first contra dance that I ever saw was at this Ethnic Folk Arts Center in New York City.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. And but somehow you heard this music and you just were compelled to it?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Well, I had been a music major in college and piano was my major. And, you know, I played classical music, but I never played anything like this. I had never played by ear and I don't know, I was just driven... to want to learn it bad enough that I taught myself to play by ear.

**Julie Vallimont**

Amazing.Yeah, I made that transition. I was also a classical player, a very common one. So what were the things you did in learning piano? Like, who did you study from? And what did you listen to? And how did you make that switch in your brain of learning to play by ear?

**Mary Cay Brass**

I went to the very first year of Ashokan and many of those early years of Ashokan as first a camper and then staff person. So there were a lot of different musicians there that I learned from on various especially Québécois musicians, I was always really attracted to that style. And particularly [Mario Loiselle](https://quasitrad.com/mario-loiselle/) was was a favorite of mine. I was at many camps with him at both Ashokan and Pinewoods. I feel like I learned a lot from him. I wish he were here today, then I could tell him, you know, the things you don't tell people you know, that you just take for granted or something, but he was a lovely man and, and I'm starting to play some of his tunes that I really love. He was wonderful tunesmith too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Just for context, and correct me if I'm wrong, but he was a well known piano player from Quebec.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yes, he was. And there were other Québécois piano players that I really liked and I can't remember their names right now. It's just like, it was way back there, you know, in the 80s and I just am not remembering names. I remember that I was really taken by the group Héritage. And I can't remember who their piano player was and I tried to Google it and couldn't find it, but whoever it was, I know I learned a lot from that piano player too. Really, I used to do probably what you were talking about having done after that week at Pinewoods is just laboriously go through recordings and imitate other people until it becomes your own and evolves into something that's yours. You know, think that's what I did. And definitely, McQuillen was a big early influence and I feel like you know, McQuillen's left hand and his just real... what's the word he had? [He just really sticks to the, the boom chuck](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMRSPm7Pf1I), you know, I feel like I'm never far away from that boom chuck, you know, it's really, it's really close by for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think that's what drew me into your playing. Like, I just when I was learning, I just started to pay attention to different piano players and out of just about everybody, I gravitated towards your playing and I think it's very grounded in rhythm. And yet it has all these, like, subtleties of texture and tone. And, you know, like you mentioned also being inspired by DADGAD guitarists and that kind of thing. And so I think that combination of this fantastic rhythm, also a lot of drama, which we can talk about, and then all these little harmonic sonorities that you would do, a lot of which I incorporated into my own playing. I hope that's cool.

**Mary Cay Brass**

That's what we all do, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, that's the thing, like, either subconsciously or consciously, sometimes we intentionally take elements of other people's styles and bring them in our own. I mean, that's kind of how traditions should work really and then also, sometimes we're drawn to someone because they have a similar aesthetic that we do, or our styles are already similar in a way. So when did you start really playing for contra dances, like having gigs, because it can be a little hard as a piano player to get a start on stage when there's no... it's very exposed. There's nowhere to quietly learn.

**Mary Cay Brass**

I was living in New York City at that time and I started going to sessions with various friends, friends in my neighborhood where I was living had a session and I started going to it and playing accordion, or if someone else wasn't playing piano, I would sit down at the piano. And I think eventually some of us formed a band and started playing for some of those CDSS New York dances. But really, actually, not too many, not too long after I started coming to New England, to weekends, I'd come up for a [Dawn Dance weekend](https://dawndance.org/) and I started connecting and getting to know people up here. Like, I had met Andy and we'd come up and visit him, he was living in New Hampshire at the time and Acworth and and then I met David Kaynor and he was, as he always is with new musicians, welcoming. As I met more people up here, I was really drawn to moving up here and I never meant to stay in New York even as long as I did, but I ended up going to grad school and then getting a really good job that I loved. And so it became harder to leave, but I eventually did it. It was the right time. It was about '84 that I moved here and wasn't very long after I moved here that David started asking me to do gigs and things started to open up. There was a fiddler from the south that moved to the area, Bo Bradham who I started playing with, and actually that was my first recording, was a recording that we made that you might not even know about.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I don't, what was it called?

**Mary Cay Brass**

It was called "The Belle of Brattleboro." It was named after [a boat that was called The Belle of Brattleboro](https://www.cardcow.com/images/set554/card00112_fr.jpg). We got hired to play on that boat. It was like a tour boat on the West River and people could just buy a ticket and go for a ride at night, you know, and it was very sweet. So we did this tape in the mid 80s, and that was my first recording. People have since digitized that tape, but it's not very well digitized. It's kind of hissy. There's a lot of extraneous sound. That's when we started the Greenfield band.

**Julie Vallimont**

The Greenfield Dance Band. Yeah, classic.

**Mary Cay Brass**

It was a great time. I mean, I think it was about this time where Cammy Kaynor, who had run the Northfield dance, that hall was lost, the town of Northfield took it over and I think Cammy moved to Boston at that time, started a family. David took over and we started playing dances at the Guiding Star Grange and I think, you know, Stuart was there, and David and me and various other people. There were always guests and that was such a fun thing about it. There were always different people playing with us. And eventually [Peter Siegel](https://petersiegel.com/) came along and became a permanent fixture as well for that dance. Those were wonderful days of that dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who are some of the people who played with you?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Lissa Schneckenburger when she was like 14 years old. George Wilson. Tracy Scott, old friend of David's, lives in Eastern Mass. Some people whose names I cannot even think of, people who would be visiting from the West Coast, we would have as guests. There were just so many people over the years. I can't even really remember all of them. But Lissa was quite often. I think David was a real mentor for her and so she would come down quite often and play with us as she was when she was a teenager.

**Julie Vallimont**

When I was a new dancer and a new piano player. I remember starting to come out to Greenfield from Boston. And the Greenfield Dance Band dances were often the ones I ended up at. And I just loved that culture where people could sit on the stage and it just felt like a big community party up on the stage and David had sit-ins welcome. I just remember sitting up there watching you all play and just observing how everything worked and kind of soaking it in and enjoying the view from the stage. And it was a real feeling of camaraderie that then... I didn't feel the same way about at most of the dances in Boston, either they were too big and so sit-ins just weren't practical, or they had a lot of name bands with repertoire where sitting in is hard. There were some sit-in friendly dances. I have so many good memories of that dance and that sound and you guys just playing tunes in the groove and rhythm section and David's fiddle harmonies.

**Mary Cay Brass**

There were so many good things. Yeah, it was a great rhythm section. Peter and Stuartand I... it was a blast always playing together. David always made every fiddler sound like twice the fiddler they were with his beautiful harmony.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's the gift that he has. It's like rhythmic harmonization the way he plays.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Absolutely. Just really, really a gift. And so yeah, that's kind of how I found my way into it is through the Greenfield dance, and then going to camps and meeting other musicians and making connections.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then eventually Airdance started. How did all that come about?

**Mary Cay Brass**

How did that come about? I had played a lot of duo gigs with Rodney over the years. Just various things and also, we did a trip to England and Scotland. That was a tour that was organized by maybe Folk Works in England, and David Oliver on Folk Works, I think. And we did a couple weeks of touring and playing with other bands in Scotland and England. That was, whoa, the way back in the '90s and I'm not exactly sure how Airdance evolved out of that, I really don't remember.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, sometimes these things just happen so organically.

**Mary Cay Brass**

I think it was probably one of those things. Oh, you know what? I think it had to do with [Great Meadow Music](https://www.greatmeadowmusic.com/). I think that they approached Rodney and said, we'll fund a recording if you create a band, or something like that. It's getting clearer. And so then we did this recording with David Surette. Stuart, me, Rodney and Sam Zucchini, and then we had to come up with a name. And I do remember sitting there with long sheets of paper brainstorming names for that band, and eventually we came up with Airdance, and then it became its own thing for a good bunch of years. Maybe like eight years. Had a good run.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, another iconic band. And I just remember hearing that rhythm section too and being like, what a rhythm section! Of course, it has a lot in common with, you know, a lot of overlap in personnel.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yes. Well, Stuart and I.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's when I really fell in love with the sound... with like, guitar plus piano plus bass together, or piano plus mandolin plus bass or just, it's just a really great sound.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, absolutely. It was a great sound and a lot of creativity. And yeah, lots of great gigs in that period.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's not a sound we hear a lot of anymore in contra dance, piano as a part of a bigger rhythm section. Like, I'm trying to think, Great Bear had piano but with electric guitar often and, you know, foot percussion or drums, like, different kind of setting. And there are a lot of bands that have a piano. And there are a lot of bands that have a guitar. I remember Celticladda, Randy Miller's band had piano and guitar, Eric Anderson and Tom Hodgson, and then a few other folks. Eric was another person who I learned to play contra piano from and like you, he used to let me sit on stage during his gigs with Randy, and I would just watch his hands. I couldn't get enough. How did it change your playing being in a rhythm section like that? Oh, I forgot to mention [Tidal Wave](http://home.total.net/~j.saintcyr/index_eng.html). That's another band I was thinking of, of course, has Stuart in it. But another band with a really close piano/bass rhythm section. And there are, of course, others. I'm sorry that I forgot you. It doesn't mean I don't appreciate you. Dear other bands... [laughing]

**Mary Cay Brass**

So did you just ask me another question?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I did. And then I cut myself off. I just asked you what it's like playing in a rhythm section like that versus playing as the only rhythm instrument?

**Mary Cay Brass**

It's very freeing actually, and it's very... there's so much support, and a lot of listening to each other. There's a real force in a rhythm system section like that that I really love. Because you can create the drama as a force. And you're not just one instrument trying to create some drama within the course of a whole dance, you know, but you've got this team working with you that are kind of on the same wavelength and really listening to each other and going with that drama. So, yeah, it's a lot of fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you made Green Mountain at some point.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, that was another Great Meadow suggestion. They said, gee, there's so many great musicians, women musicians in New England, they just they really liked my playing. And they just said, would you put together something? And they kind of gave me free range to do whatever I wanted. And so I asked various people... Becky Tracy and Sarah Blair and [Mary Lea](https://dancefiddler.com/)... and Susan Conger was on a couple of cuts, especially the Scandinavian, and yeah, that was a fun album to make, and it became kind of a popular album and it's out of print now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, unfortunately, I'm glad I have a copy. [Susan Kevra](https://susankevra.com/) is on that calling.

**Mary Cay Brass**

That was on a different one.

**Julie Vallimont**

That was a different one. Okay.

**Mary Cay Brass**

That was called Full Swing. Susan did calling on it and the cuts were long enough to be used for dancing. You know, they weren't just three times through. So each one was more like dance length, so that people if they were like teaching a beginner crowd or something could use those if they didn't have a band handy. I guess that was some of the idea behind making that CD. Some of the same musicians are on it too, Sarah and Becky and Mary I think are on both those albums.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, we don't have a lot of, like, record labels in the contra world or trad world anymore. Great Meadow Music has had a really important role, and there's a lot of great albums in their catalog.

**Mary Cay Brass**

They had their finger on the pulse of an era with their recordings, you know? I think, because they were funding all these recordings. I mean, most musicians didn't have a lot of money to put into, you know, $10,000 recordings. I feel like, what they gave us was a gift of all these recordings that they funded. I know I would never have had the money to make, you know, I think I made six different recordings with them. The three Airdance, and Greenfield Dance Band did one, and then the Green Mountain and Full Swing.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like now, how do bands make recordings? A lot of them now use Kickstarter. But there was a time in between when there wasn't really a Kickstarter, and there weren't necessarily record labels. But I think it's an interesting creative process to approach musicians with the project and invite them to make it, you might get different things than if they're all making their individual albums with their fans or solo albums or something. You get a different kind of sound, different kind of projects. And so, if anyone's listening and you want to start a record label, I'm sure contra bands would be very happy to make music for you.

**Mary Cay Brass**

I know. It's a really different era now on. I'm just grateful that they really recorded an era, that era. I guess the in the '90s and early 2000s. I'm not sure when they did their last CD. I'm not quite sure what the spectrum was with them. But anyway, I'm glad that they did what they did.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It's funny because to me, that sound is like one of the classic sounds, like quintessentially New England contra dance music. But then, of course, that's the era that I kind of came up in and learned from. And so, you know, we've talked a lot in this podcast about like, what is traditional? It depends on who's defining it and, you know, traditional for a certain period of time, but man, that was a good era.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, I mean, I think as recordings became more available and people could... at first buy cassettes, and you can copy cassettes and you can record other people... as recording became easier, you know, that the learning and the cross fertilization, I think, started to really exponentially grow.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, a lot of synergy there. So, would you be interested in telling us a little bit about your piano style, and like, what your approaches or what kind of styles you play or anything you'd want to say about it, or I can regurgitate your entire 2008 piano class if you want.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Wow. Well, I think, I feel like I really back up different styles like the different kinds of tunes that feed into the New England contra dance world seem to come from Quebec, and then Irish/Scottish traditions, old time traditions, and then old New England traditions, and I feel like I do something a little bit different for all of those. And I try to use what I know of Québécois backup style with that genre of tunes. I feel like with Irish tunes, you know, I really tried to absorb a lot, as you said, from DADGAD guitar players. I love what they do for Irish tunes, and I think I tried to imitate that sound as best I could on the piano. And then for old time tunes, I feel like it's just really bare bones rhythm, not a lot of... maybe some walking bass things happening, but not too much. Really. It's just about kind of staying ahead of the beat and just playing really choppy driving chords, but not very many chords. It's easy to play too many chords in an old time tune. I'll never forget I was at Fiddle Tunes and giving a piano workshop and and a guitar player was there accompanying kind of a famous old time fiddler, an older gentleman who I didn't really know. But he came to my piano class to get ideas. And then we were doing a tune like Sandy River Belle or something, and I played what chords I played for him. And he looked at me, he shook his head and he said, I'd get fired if I played all those chords. So that made me really simplify more when I played old time tunes, I really thought about that. And I thought, yeah, it's not about the fancy chords it's really just about the support of the rhythm. So, I think that's kind of a summary.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you use a lot of like, kind of harmonic lines in your playing. Like I remember you teaching something you called harmonizing the scale, or I remembered, maybe I call it that, but I thought you called it that, where you'll walk down the whole scale in thirds, like block chords as you go down the scale.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, I can't remember exactly what that means. But, I probably do it. And I probably gave it that name. But I don't exactly remember.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like, if you're going from a I chord to a IV chord, from D to G, you might walk up like, D, E, F#, G in the bass. And then you would harmonize that with a D chord, and then a G chord and then a D chord over F# on your right hand.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yep, definitely.

**Julie Vallimont**

So a lot of these moving chords, which is a very rich style, which is a little bit more than a bare bones, boom chuck where the right hand... the right hand is more than just an offbeat, you know, the left hand being the bass, like Bob McQuillen might have played that as a bass run, where you would play it as a two-handed bass run on the left, but with a harmonic compliment on the right side.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah. And I feel like I got a lot of those ideas from DADGAD guitar players, too, because they do a lot of that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like the way they just move around on the fretboard.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, things like that. And I really like that sound and the movement it gives the melody and that kind of airiness, spaciousness of it. That sound, too. And like using a lot of sus chords. I think I'm not really good at articulating, it's easier for me to hear someone else articulate it and go, yeah, that's probably right.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's hard without a piano in front of you. So much of it is just in your hands and your body.

**Mary Cay Brass**

It's kind of intuitive at this point.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, exactly. But I also remember watching you play, and you would do this thing that I just thought of, is like this is a very Mary Cay thing to do, where it would be like a couple from the end and you'd build up to this V chord for the whole B part, you'd be building, building, building and then you just do this crash, like octaves down the piano crash, crash, crash, crash and then back to the A1.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, definitely. I recognize that. Drama, definite drama. It's very fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

And so instead of like, glissando, which some people might do, you're doing these, like block chords, down an octave each time.

**Mary Cay Brass**

And they were kind of sus chords, too. They weren't just the chord, it was, like I added extra notes, kind of adds a little more umph to the chord to add these little, you know, major seconds within a chord, you know, wasn't just 1-3-5 but they'll be maybe 1-2-3-5 or 1-3-5-6.

**Julie Vallimont**

It makes it a little crunchier sounding.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Crunchier sounding, yup.

**Julie Vallimont**

A little more bite to it.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Mm hmm, bite. That's a really good word. Yeah, definitely.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you ever play keyboard? Or are you one of the people who really prefers an acoustic piano?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Oh, no, I almost always play keyboards. In the olden days, every hall had old uprights, but they eventually became untunable, at least not at 440. So if you were playing with any fixed pitch instruments, you know, it just got impossible. And those old uprights kind of just bit the dust. And everyone started to move towards keyboards, because they were always in tune and they were portable. And so yeah, for a long, long, long time, I played keyboards. Also the really nice thing about having a keyboard is that you can have eye contact with your band and that goes a long way for communication. And having my back to the musicians was, you know, not good for my neck. I'd get lots of aches and pains from you know, twisting around trying to make eye cotact with the band. So, yeah. I love my keyboard.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and then when you travel with it, you always have the same predictable thing everywhere you go.

**Mary Cay Brass**

I didn't travel with it on airplanes, but I just trusted events to provide, you know, good keyboards, but yeah, around New England definitely I would just bring it every gig.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's just nice.

**Mary Cay Brass**

It would just basically live in my car.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, why even take it out? For years my car was just a rolling keyboard garage. That's what I called it.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, kind of like that. It still is actually because of my choirs, except not now, of course, during COVID. But, I just leave it in there during my choir seasons, too.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you've also studied ethnomusicology, and you've done a lot of Eastern European music and other kind of music. Does that interact with your contra playing at all? Are they separate worlds for you? Or how do they inform each other?

**Mary Cay Brass**

No, I think they're pretty separate worlds. They're just another another passion that I have. And that started very young for me, I grew up with neighbors who were Croatian and their three daughters who were around my age all belong to a little Croatian folk dance group in Minnesota, and they invited me to be in that group. And I started folk dancing when I was nine, basically, and we had little costumes and we performed at festival of nations at the state fair at you know, we learned songs, and we were all friends who were in this little dance troupe together and we'd sit on the playground at school and sing Croatian folk songs. And I was, you know, sort of half French Canadian and part Swedish and, you know it wasn't anything part of my ethnic heritage, but I got really drawn to into it, and at a very early age in and then in college at the University of Minnesota, it was huge. There were huge folk dance groups that met every Tuesday night in front of the student union with like, 200 people dancing, it was great. It just became my whole world. A bunch of us started a performing ensemble, which still exists today as a really semi professional ensemble in the Twin Cities. It was a very rich time. And then one of my professors said to me, you should apply for a Fulbright to go to Eastern Europe, and she really held my hand through the process of doing that. And I got it, I went to Yugoslavia for two years, two and a half years. In the '70s. A while ago, and it was during communist Yugoslavia, and I learned the language and just did a lot of field work and a lot of festivals and dance camps over there that were for leaders of folk ensembles, and I would go to them and it was quite an amazing time of my life to do that. I was like, 23, I was a baby.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you became involved in [Village Harmony](https://villageharmony.org/).

**Mary Cay Brass**

Right at the beginning, like the first year, Larry Gordon called me up and he said, I'm thinking of starting a camp for teenagers. And I heard you do a lot of Balkan music would you like to come and teach it? And I went, yeah, sounds great. So we did like one camp that summer and it went really well. And then the next summer, we did like two camps. And then we did like, two camps in this country and one in England. And it just started growing but at the same time that that was happening Yugoslavia was falling apart with civil war. And Village Harmony wasn't doing very many international camps at that point yet but they started evolving more of the international camps and I proposed to them that I'd like to do camps in Eastern Europe. And they paid for me to go on a research trip in 2005 to Bosnia, and figure out how to create a camp there. So that was kind of the beginning of doing camps there, and so since 2006 until today, I think I've done like 11 camps in Eastern Europe. And Quebec last summer. Last summer, in 2019, we did our first Quebec camp with Nicholas Williams was my co leader and I'm blanking out on her name. She's an amazing singer from Quebec City and I'm blanking on her name, I'm really sorry. [Ed: Gabrielle Bouthillier] But we had a great camp with about 25 campers from teenagers to every age from all over the States and Canada. And we toured, we spent a week, a kind of idyllic week on this lake where Nicholas had gotten married. It's beautiful. And then we toured and we got to play and sing at this great festival, [Mémoire et Racines](https://memoireracines.org/en/), great festival. We did many concerts there and then kind of a concert at the main stage between acts. We kind of did a flashmob in the audience.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, cool.

**Mary Cay Brass**

We kind of were there as flashmobbers, doing our thing, and they gave us free admission and meals and everything to be there for the weekend. And it was really, really great for us and then we toward other other areas of Quebec and Pascal joined us for some some of the time, [Pascal Gemme](http://pascalgemme.com/). And we had some dances in some areas and yeah, it was just great. So that's a place where my Village Harmony world and my contra dance world kind of came together was doing Quebec camp, and that was a first, that camp up there.

**Julie Vallimont**

So when you're doing dances, are they contra dances?

**Mary Cay Brass**

No, they were Québécois dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, Québécois dances like veillée style, like quadrilles and things like that?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

So much fun, some of my favorite kinds of dancing.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, Pascal's wife Marie-Soleil [Pilette] is a caller. So she came and called and it was great. That was the last international camp that I did. And who knows when they'll happen again. Everything this summer got canceled but otherwise... It's just sort of part of everything, like all the different kinds of music I love. But another way that my involvement in New England dance evolved was into doing music with children a lot and creating [New England Dancing Masters](https://dancingmasters.com/) with Peter and Mary Alice Amidon and Andy Davis. The four of us in the early '90s, we saw a need in the music teaching world. We were all music teachers, and we saw a need for a good book with the dances really clearly written out and with really good recordings of good music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was that [Chimes of Dunkirk](https://dancingmasters.com/product/chimes-of-dunkirk/)?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Chimes of Dunkirk. Yeah. And that led to another book and another book, and, you know, now we've got a whole series of books doing dances with communities or with children and early childhood singing games. We're just about to put out another book with another person that we've started working with. But anyway, it's really evolved into quite a big influence, I think, in the music education world. We've had the experience of going to like national music educator conferences and people coming up and wanting to take our photograph, because their students love our music so much and love doing the dances so they wanted to take a picture home for their students or things like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you do a lot of school residencies?

**Mary Cay Brass**

I did. The money kind of dried up for them. But for a while, I had some that I did kind of regularly every year that were really wonderful, where I had a lot of amazing support. And yeah, so I think Peter and Mary Alice did more residencies, they really focused on that a lot more. Andy was really the music, public school, music teacher, warrior of all of us, he just retired, I think two years ago and he really did it for 30 years. A great job. But I think that our library of books has really moved all over the country and other continents, New Zealand, Australia, the British Isles.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's amazing. This is Andy Davis, by the way, in case anyone is forgetting that earlier reference. Well, it's interesting, because when you're trying to pass on a tradition, or build community, there's so many different ways to do it. For some of us, a lot of us, it's as young adults or not young adults, you know, someone takes us to a dance and we discover it. Or there's this whole generation of kids who have been brought up because their parents were dancers, and they get brought up going to Pinewoods or going to their local dance, and they grow up in it. But then there's schools and teaching the general public about the traditions that come right here from New England.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah it was so great to do that. And, you know, most of my residencies ended with a dance, a family dance with the whole community of parents joining in.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love that stuff. Out of all the fun, exciting, glamorous, well, I don't know how contra dances ever get glamorous, but even the most exciting contra dance I also just love the feeling of a really great family dance.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, it's great and especially when the kids are, like, teaching their parents the dances. They're the experts. It's great. I had a residency that I did every year for many, many years in Westminster West, a tiny little school. There was just a wonderful very inspired, head teacher there, Claire Oglesby, bless her. And she would just hire me every spring, every May for like the month of May to come work with her kids doing a program around some ethnic tradition. But I always did dancing. And we always had a family dance and it was always very moving. I just have amazing, beautiful memories of these spring nights with the whole family and [the Westminster West church](http://westminsterwest.org/), dancing, and it was just very joyful and just kind of the epitome of community.

**Julie Vallimont**

I wonder how many of these kids get to have it be a part of their lives going forward? If it's just something they do in school? And then, you know, versus how many of them discover these traditions and go to them later?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah. You never know.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember we did not have The Chimes of Dunkirk in my school. It was before that by far but we had to do square dancing, and it was awful and awkward and I didn't want to hold Kenny's hand and you know, like those kinds of moments.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I just love the thought it was like sort of an afterthought, like three days of PE class were square dancing. And that's our entire traditional dance and music exposure of my entire childhood. So, what a wonderful change.

**Mary Cay Brass**

It's really nice when you can make it the culture of your school. I think that's what Andy was able to do for generations of kids here in Brattleboro where dancing is just really a normal part of weekly, daily life in their school and part of the community.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you have thoughts about what changed with the residency? Like, you mentioned the money dried up? Is it different priorities, or funding? Or do you do know? Just curious.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, I think that often they were funded by grants that dried up. Vermont Council on the Arts. They just stopped getting funded. I remember, like Mary Alice, at the end of her residencies, the places that she still got funded were the Hudson Valley of New York. And she had regular gigs there that she would go to every year and somehow, they managed to keep their funding going longer than most of the Vermont schools and probably New Hampshire. I don't know.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I'd be curious to see, like, if this is state funding from various arts councils, like, what are the cultural changes? And do they have less funding in general? Or are they funding other things now? If anyone wants to look at it, have fun, get back to us.

**Mary Cay Brass**

It's really fun to go into a school where the music teacher really is excited about your repertoire and wants to learn how to use it better with their students. And so you feel that enthusiasm from the teacher and that investment in it, and that the students feel that, that's really satisfying to do. As opposed to the case where you might get hired to come in and do a residency cause they need to satisfy the dance component of their curriculum, you know, and that's a very different thing. But my favorite kind of residencies were the ones where you could clearly tell the music teacher is really — and/or the head teacher of the school — really believes in this and is excited and enthusiastic about it as well.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wonderful. Well, I hope to have all those folks on the podcast and then we could talk about that more too which'll be great to hear like some of Andy's perspectives. We had Arthur Davis on the podcast.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, I heard that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It would be fun to chat with Andy some time. So let's go back to the mainstream contra world for a moment, whatever that is. What are the kind of dances that you play, were they mostly local New England? I know you also played big festivals with Airdance and I know you did a lot of touring for years. I want to hear stories, what what were your stories like for those times?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Well, regularly you know, I was playing in Greenfield second, fourth and fifth Fridays, and often Stuart's dances too on second and fourth Saturdays I guess. And, you know, in Boston, Cambridge dances and then various festivals, some with the Greenfield Dance Band, some with... and then lots with Airdance. Airdance was really a touring band. Whereas Greenfield Dance Band is really a house band that occasionally toured. Not really toured, did a festival here, the [DownEast [Country Dance] Festival](https://deffa.org/festival/) or the [Old Songs Festival](https://festival.oldsongs.org/), particularly mostly local. But Airdance really traveled everywhere and that was exciting and fun. You know, I think it was really fun doing for example, Alasdair Fraser's camp [Valley of the Moon](http://www.valleyofthemoon.org/) in California and doing a big concert with him and doing the Sidmouth Festival a couple different times... I've done that Sidmouth Festival, maybe once with Village Harmony, and once with Airdance, and that's a big festival in the south of England and really, so many great musicians there and people who are heroes of mine were there and then also, we did a folk week through [Folkworks in Durham, England](https://sagegateshead.com/seasons/folkworks-summer-schools/), which was like a dance camp here, but it was music, just music... not dance. I taught piano that week.

**Julie Vallimont**

Contra piano, specifically?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Contra piano, specifically. There's one person in particular in England who's probably kind of like you, he really took everything in that I taught that week and then I did a singing thing that week, as well. I'm really grateful for all of those opportunities. Go a lot to Alaska, I've probably been to, like, 25 states doing those festivals. But at a certain point, I have to say just environmentally speaking, it just didn't feel like such a great thing to be doing, hopping on airplanes to play contra dances. I started really... as there became more and more consciousness of the climate issues that we're facing, it just became clear to me that I couldn't do that. I needed to cut back flying to the bare necessities, like what I need to do, mostly to see family or if, for example, you know, things that are really... And I'm really curious to see how that unfolds after COVID. Because it's been become very clear to environmentalists how much cleaner the planet is without a lot of flying. And I just wonder how that's gonna affect, like, how things will change because of that, and the need we have to be really conscious of what we're doing to the planet and with the climate. I'm grateful I had those opportunities. They were enriching, they were fun. I met so many great people and great musicians and other bands. And at the same time, I feel like, okay, I'm happy to stay in New England now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, you know, one thing that might come out of this, I hope that we, when we can be getting to be with each other more is invest more in our local communities.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Exactly. I totally agree. In every way from family dances on up. Really, really focusing on them. It's gonna be interesting to see how that all unfolds once the world opens up again.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, like, I hope we kind of don't all go back to our old ways in every way. You know, like we take some of these good things out of here. I've often wondered like, what is it to be a touring contra dance band, like why is that a thing? It's fun, but I have often thought about my own carbon footprint for sure. But then I'm like, oh, but we were gonna go play at Sidmouth and I really wanted to before all this happened, you know? So it's like, oh, man, I love seeing all these different communities and it's tricky.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, it's tricky.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm glad that you're able to live by your values.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Well, I feel grateful that I can and to a great extent, that's because of that choral music, my choirs really are supporting me, at this point.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you ever play with, like, pickup contra bands?

**Mary Cay Brass**

All the time. That something that I think happens less and less, it's more band... band-centric, dances and weekends are more band centric than they used to be. I would say I played in pickup bands a lot in the past. It just doesn't seem to be happening that much anymore. It didn't seem to be before. But, you know, I don't really have my finger on the pulse of the last few years, as I've gotten more involved in the choral music and organizing camps in other countries and whatnot. I've kind of lost my sense of what the pulse is.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, from my perspective, from where I sit, it seems like it's only continued to go in that direction, towards bands in a way.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, definitely. I think the internet really helps promote that, you know, and people's easy access to and young people growing up just really being savvy about it. Like my generation wasn't so savvy about it. And you know, we didn't do self-promotion. It all happened word of mouth.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Or David Kaynor's handwritten dance flyers.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Handwritten dance flyers. They're like collector's items.

**Julie Vallimont**

They are beautiful calligraphy.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Absolutely.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or Ann Percival's hand-painted dance flyers.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Very, very colorful.

**Julie Vallimont**

The Guiding Star Grange has had some good traditional dance flyers over the years. Really nice art, maybe they're the hub of dance artwork.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Absolutely, I agree.

**Julie Vallimont**

So did you play dance weekends as a pickup band ever? Or were they mostly interested in Airdance, bands with names?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Nope, both. I've done both. Just a couple years ago. I mean, actually, I did a dance weekend a couple years ago in Missouri and they wanted the sound that was on Green Mountain. Mary Lea and I and Sam Bartlett did that one.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, I wish organizers would write, that's like my favorite sentence to hear from an organizer, would be, we want that beautiful New England sound.

**Mary Cay Brass**

There was a dance weekend in California that also wanted that sound. And I did that and ended up doing that with Sarah Blair and Stuart, I think and maybe another person I can't remember. There's definitely been over the years various times where the organizer isn't just trying to hire the hottest band of the moment, but they like a sound and they rarely would call me, it's usually a fiddler. But occasionally, and say, bring this sound. That was great. I loved that. I doubt that that happens very much anymore. But another change I was thinking from the generation of the '70s, '80s, early '90s, is that so many musicians now are so highly educated, musically educated, like so many fiddlers now come out of NEC or Berklee or, you know... they're real professional musicians, have really studied their instrument on a deep level and I think a lot of how it was in the past was just from musician to musician or through families and not so much a higher education degree. Well, because it was folk music, but it's really been taken to a high level of skill by a lot of wonderful musicians and that raises the bar. And the professionalism of a band and being really savvy about websites and promotion and all that. None of that existed in the '80s and early '90s, it was a really different world.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah and maybe organizers get used to that and so a pickup band looks less... also dancers expect a name band. They come because they want to know who's playing, just like you choose what concert to go to, and so they won't necessarily take a chance on the organizer saying, don't worry, I have this really great band for you. They want to know who it is and what it is and go to their website. And it's funny, I don't know if dancers think we like to promote ourselves, but I think most of us are pretty uncomfortable doing it. Writing a bio is literally my least favorite thing in the whole world. It's just not fun. I mean, some bands love it and thrive on it, but a lot of them just don't want to do it or do it because we have to.

**Mary Cay Brass**

I think people who go and major in it at Berklee, they have classes in running a business. So they absolutely come out with skills on how to do that, that we never learned.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, and classes in stagecraft and all these other elements of being a professional musician.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah. It's a really different world.

**Julie Vallimont**

I always hoped that there's room in the contra world for all those things.

**Mary Cay Brass**

I think there probably is, but I think that it tends towards people wanting a named band that's got a fancy website and, you know, lots of recordings, and I think that's more the direction things had been going in. We'll see where it goes from here. I feel like for me, I've made enough recordings. I've traveled enough. And I'm happy to work locally. I'm happiest playing small local dances, weddings, family dances, that kind of thing right now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who are the folks that you play with most often these days?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Well, these days is during COVID so I get together with people on porches you know, Mary Lea and I get together quite a bit, play French and Scandinavian music a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'd love to be a fly on that wall, really fun.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Andy and I get together some and mostly play Québécois music, we'll take turns playing accordion and piano.

**Julie Vallimont**

I also want to be there.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Actually, just a couple days ago, about five of us got together up in Alstead at [Orchard Hill Bakery](http://orchardhillbreadworks.com/) and played in their pavilion outside, kind of socially distanced from each other and that was really nice. So just kind of pick-upy things. Oh, the Québécois session two weeks ago was in Montague on the green. Doug Creighton was leading it and yeah, so various things like that. I've been trying to go to while the weather's warm. Which is about to change.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a whole tune to be written or an album, "while the weather's warm."

**Mary Cay Brass**

"While the weather's warm."

**Julie Vallimont**

A song circle and then the other half of it is "now the weather's not."

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, we'll see what happens. We're back to Zoom and more Zoom. I'm doing my choirs on Zoom right now. And just because people want to keep together I have recordings of almost like 25 years of concerts that are really good recordings and I basically go over songs, we revisit songs we've sung in the past, I go over the parts, I screenshare and we sing along with the CD. And it's not the same, everybody says it's not the same, but it's really all we have.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and it's better than nothing.

**Mary Cay Brass**

It's better than nothing. It keeps us connected as community. It keeps us singing. And the same, I've gone to some sessions online, same thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, they're even having virtual contra dances. They've done a couple in the Grange in Greenfield, you know, a band sits there, just them and a caller, and they broadcast it out to people.

**Mary Cay Brass**

And you're just supposed to dance with imaginary people in your living room?

**Julie Vallimont**

I haven't watched any of them because it's not what is emotionally drawing me in. We all have different reactions to these things. So I don't know exactly how it works. But yeah, maybe it's like a concert, maybe you dance in your house if you want to. Maybe you watch it if you don't. Some of them have been fundraisers so the dancing isn't the main point. I don't know, we could find out. But people are trying lots of different things to keep things going.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah. And just keep connection. Keep the space in our lives for it.

**Julie Vallimont**

I just miss seeing people because, you know, like, especially as musicians, we run into each other, at gigs at dances, and we run into callers, we run into dancers, and there's all these people, I don't even know all their names like, oh, you! Dancey Guy! You know it's that guy. And we always wave and say hello like we've known each other for a long time. And now I'm like, I don't think I know what your name was but I always remember smiling at you.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

I miss seeing everyone. We don't run into each other anymore.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, it's true. And so that's why a lot of people are... like for my choirs, they're signing up. Like I have 100 singers right now and they just want to see each other and we do breakout rooms and they get to chat. That's fun. It just keeps the connection going and it gets songs going through or tunes going through people's heads instead of news.

**Julie Vallimont**

We have to keep that music and dance in our life. I mean, that's why we need it in our lives in the first place.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Exactly. It's so healing, so healing and so I've been really focused on playing a lot and learning a lot of tunes and just trying to use this time in that way especially on accordion.

**Julie Vallimont**

What kind of tunes are you learning right now?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Québécois, French, and Scandi basically.

**Julie Vallimont**

What parts of France?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Mary Lea and I play a repertoire of songs from an accordionist from France named Stéphane Delicq.

**Julie Vallimont**

He had waltzes in five and waltzes in seven.

**Mary Cay Brass**

And eight. Yeah, we play a bunch of those. And we love his repertoire. So that's, that's some of it and we play a bunch of bourrées and polkas and whatnot I think from Breton mostly and, yeah, that, and we both love a lot of Scandi music so we have quite a big repertoire of Scandi music that we play. You know, occasionally I try to go when it's not COVID time to the session, the Scandi session once a month in Greenfield but I'm also usually teaching that night, Monday nights, so it happens in my off seasons that I can go. But I'm about to start taking some accordion lessons from someone I've only heard of but haven't met, but she went to NEC from Sweden, [Sunniva Brynnel](https://sunnivabrynnel.com/).

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, yeah I know Sunniva.

**Mary Cay Brass**

I'm gonna take a six-week class with her.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, fun. She's a great teacher. Well we'll link to some of her music in the podcast notes. It was like, all this stuff isn't necessarily directly related to contra dancing. But a lot of contra dance musicians have interests in other traditional styles of dance music, and I think that's why I think it's interesting. A lot of us dabble or visit or travel or immerse ourselves, you know, in these traditions and they influence each other, you know, like David Kaynor was excited about hambos and brought them here and you know, these little things really end up influencing our community, and folks in past episodes have also talked about Ashokan as a place where you get all these different dance traditions altogether, mingling together and they all influence each other in little ways.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yup, definitely.

**Julie Vallimont**

And there's a big balfolk push in the contra dance community now in a lot of dances, which I'm personally very excited about.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, me too. I like it. And yeah, I'm excited to learn more of that music as well.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's really great music, I just love it so much.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yep, that's the thing, there's just always more music to learn and the exciting thing about loving music is that there's just always more, there's always that next tune to learn and to get excited about.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, like, for me, half of my family is French and the other half is French Canadian and for whatever reason, I've just always had an especial affinity for those two traditions.

**Mary Cay Brass**

In your blood.

**Julie Vallimont**

I guess so. I mean all my grandparents spoke French. Like my both my grandmothers spoke French, but I didn't learn it as a kid, you know, they don't pass it on... you move to United States and you assimilate and my grandmother, she had nine siblings or eight siblings. I can't count. I feel like an awful great-grandkid but I can't remember how many there were. But anyway, they all spoke French and sang crazy songs from Quebec and France. And you mentioned that you have French Canadian roots.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, my mom.

**Julie Vallimont**

Where is she from?

**Mary Cay Brass**

She was from Minnesota, but her grandparents came from Quebec, to Minnesota.

**Julie Vallimont**

And did that have any, like, direct impact on you? Like, did you grow up around French Canadian music?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Not around the music, but my grandfather spoke the language and I remember hearing it. Because Minnesota has such a big Scandinavian population I heard Scandinavian music. When I started folk dancing again, when I was an older teenager, like when I was 18, then I started getting involved in Scandinavian dance as well as Balkan and a lot of different traditions that were really popular and thriving at that time. But there's always been a lot of Scandinavian music in Minnesota and so I would say it was an early influence for me. And I bought my first accordion from an old Swedish guy in St. Paul, who had a basement full of accordions, and I saw an ad in the paper. This was way before internet and I called him up and he said, oh, come take a look and bought my first accordion for $30 from him.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, that's a good price for an accordion, they can be very expensive.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, my most recent one was $5,000.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that's even a good price. I think they get even worse than that. It's crazy, such a specialized piece of equipment.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sometimes I think it's crazy that we play accordion, it's like... they only depreciate and they're very expensive but they're wonderful.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Oh, they're great.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's worth every penny.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Absolutely. I love my accordion and I love all the different traditions I can play on it. Also the Balkan traditions, and there's just so many great traditions that have accordion in them.

**Julie Vallimont**

You play piano accordion?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are some of your favorite contra dance tunes to play, like tunes from Quebec?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, definitely tunes from Quebec, all kinds of them, but also just really like the chestnuts of New England like Money Musk, I could play Money Musk every week and be happy, or Lamplighter's Hornpipe or Fisher's Hornpipe and really, the classics, Lady of the Lake. I love all those tunes. I would say those are really some of my favorites and then just lots of French Canadian tunes. Like, I don't have specific names in mind, but I love them all.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and if you're listening to bands, albums like Héritage, and there's just so many classic Québécois albums. It's just wonderful tunes and wonderful repertoire.

**Mary Cay Brass**

They were really great and they really inspired me. The early versions of [La Bottine Souriante](http://www.bottinesouriante.com/welcome-2677-en.html) also, before they got a little loud and a little more rambunctious and I think a lot of people like that, but I liked the simpler version.

**Julie Vallimont**

More tune-based. You could hear the tune?

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah. I was shocked at Mémoire et Racines last year when the band [Le Vent du Nord](https://leventdunord.com/en/the-band/) was there, and I have a lot of their albums and they're really traditional sounding... and whoa, at this festival, they were all about electric guitar, electric bass.

**Julie Vallimont**

They have André Brunet now, is that right?

**Mary Cay Brass**

I guess so. I was just so surprised at how electrified they were at this. Maybe they just do that for festivals? Or maybe there's recent recordings I don't know about that are more electrified, but I really appreciate their harmonies and their earlier sound, I guess.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I think even the way some of these bands are mixed, is different now. Like the way the foot percussion is mixed, a few of these wonderful Québécois bands they have like very bass-y foot percussion. It's like, oohm and they bring their own mixing engineers, like a lot of bands do, so you can control your own sound, and it's an oomphier sound for sure.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Definitely.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a bit of a stylistic change, you know, but maybe, it's like they're responding to what audiences want and they're also doing what they want to be doing. That's what music sounds like now in other places.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yep. Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I'm curious like about arranging because you played a lot of pickup bands where you don't necessarily arrange. And then something in a band like Airdance, how much of that was arranged for you as a rhythm player? What was your role in putting sets together or deciding how things went? How much of what you play was arranged versus made up on the fly?

**Mary Cay Brass**

I would say that we had sets that we had recorded that had certain aspects to them that we would probably repeat as we played them for dances, but also we would just put together tunes on the fly. I don't know, I think more of the arranging just happened intuitively as... except for the things that were set in recordings. But we would never play it exactly the same as that recording, of course. But there were certain things that we would be excited about on our recording of it that we would incorporate into a live situation.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, like a lot of arrangements come about because you're about to make a recording. And then you're like, oh, wait, now we have to decide how this goes. So we had to make it interesting and then you take that back, and you flesh it out into a nine minute or eight minute dance set. But you would not really like through compose eight minutes of an arrangement for a contra dance.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Never. That's kind of suffocating to me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely. And so you might take rhythm breaks, or people would take solos or trade off on melody and harmony or you'd probably do chord subs. Like probably you and Stuart would coordinate on those.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah. Mostly intuitively, or was like... an eyebrow lifted, you know. Like, we know what's coming.

**Julie Vallimont**

You just feel it. I mean, when you work together long enough, you just feel it's coming. And you know what the thing is gonna be.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, kinda like that. Definitely a lot of intuition and just years of repetition.

**Julie Vallimont**

But that can give it a freshness. I think that's another trend in the last 10 years of more like, really arranged material where you have an arrangement that goes for a whole contra dance, and you might shift it a little bit in terms of how long you stay in each section, but the arrangement happens every time. There have been some bands that have been very arranged. I think not all bands now do it, but there were bands like Great Bear Trio, or then just Great Bear, Perpetual e-Motion. Not all their sets were like that, but a lot of them were... Nor'easter would dabble in that, where we had some that were very improvisatory sets and then some where we had like an arc that was gonna happen through the whole dance. And that's another change. When you're playing with a fiddler like Rodney, he has a really large repertoire of tunes.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Yeah, he did.

**Julie Vallimont**

And kind of endless whims. It seems like.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Enormous creativity.

**Julie Vallimont**

And so that takes you in different places, I would imagine you play differently as a rhythm player to support that kind of fiddling.

**Mary Cay Brass**

You shift to support the various different fiddlers that you play with in various ways. I'm not sure that I can even articulate what those ways would be. Yeah, it's more intuitive but definitely, I'm sure that it happens. I feel really grateful that I've gotten to play with lots of wonderful people over the years, it's been really enriching and really exciting and creative.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you've left us with a lot of great albums, which I'm so happy about.

**Mary Cay Brass**

They're still out there, some of them and some of them aren't even available. I occasionally send people a thumb drive of Green Mountain.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. That's great. Green Mountain is such a good album.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Thank you.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love it. I have been playing your licks for years and I teach some of my students the licks that I learned from you that you learned from Mario or whoever else before you or from Bob McQuillen.

**Mary Cay Brass**

And the tradition goes on.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it goes on and it gets filtered and changed through each person it passes through.

**Mary Cay Brass**

They make up their own and it evolves and moves on and changes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about today?

**Mary Cay Brass**

I don't think so. I think that covers a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, thank you so much for coming, it's been so wonderful to see you again and so great to talk to you.

**Mary Cay Brass**

Thank you. It was an honor for me and it's a great project that you're involved with here. I'm really glad you're doing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thanks so much.

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