Contra Pulse Episode 15 – Peter Siegel

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello, and welcome to Contra Pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This week we speak with Peter Siegel.

Peter is a guitarist, mandolinist, and singer who began playing tunes with The Beverwyck String Band touring with Paul Rosenberg in the 90's. He made his way to the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts and became a part of the Greenfield Dance Band for the next 15 years alongside David Kaynor, Mary Cay Brass and Stuart Kenney. He then formed and currently plays in The Gaslight Tinkers, a World Beat performance and contra dance band. He has had several other contra bands over the years as well.

As a songwriter, Peter was influenced by the songwriting of Pete Seeger, dixieland, old time fiddle tunes and Afro-Caribbean rhythms. Born a red diaper grand-baby in New York, he later made his way up to Vermont, which he now calls home. Over the years he's shared the stage and been mentored by folks like Pete Seeger, Jay Unger and Molly Mason, Judy Collins, Dar Williams, Utah Phillips, and more.

When Peter is not playing or recording, he is a devoted public-school music educator in New Hampshire. As as educator, Peter has been writing songs and theatrical productions with children for the last 15 years. You can find him leading stringed and vocal workshops in Americana music at the John C. Campbell Folk School, Swannanoah, or the American Festival of Fiddle Tunes.

In our conversation, we talk about how Peter got started playing for dances, his deep musical roots in the Folk world, his experiences in contradance bands that have a wide variety of sounds, and we talk about what tradition even means, and the need to constantly experiment and innovate. We also have a lot of fun and get pretty silly towards the end, as you’ll see. We’re wearing masks in this interview, so apologies if it sounds a little muffled. Hope you enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hello Peter Seigel — welcome to Contra Pulse!

**Peter Siegel**

Hi, Julie.

**Julie Vallimont**

So happy to have you here. It's kind of an overcast fall day, but it's warm out. It's like in the 70s, maybe partly cloudy. I've been giving people a weather report at the beginning of every episode, since we record these on the porch.

**Peter Siegel**

And it's peak colors in a lot of places. I was just up in Newfane [Vermont] and it was just unbelievably magical.

**Julie Vallimont**

A little bit further north it's really happening.

**Peter Siegel**

It's happening. It's like a blip and boom, everything's brown. You got to savor the beauty.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Well, that's our philosophy of dancing, right, savoring every moment.

**Peter Siegel**

 That's right.

**Julie Vallimont**

That was hokey.

**Peter Siegel**

Nope, it's right up my alley, hokey is where I'm at all the time. Guilty.

**Julie Vallimont**

And well, so welcome. There's so many things we could talk about, where do we even begin, and I just spoke with Mary Cay Brass and so this will be fun to tie into these things. So, you know, you obviously have many different musical things in your wheelhouse, you know, being a singer-songwriter and playing guitar for all different kinds of music and then playing contra dances. But why don't we start with the contra stuff. And also being a music teacher, I forgot to say that out loud. But why don't we start with the contra stuff and then we can go from there. How did... how did you get started playing for contra dances?

**Peter Siegel**

Well, I was born in a small town. [Joking.] No. So...

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughing] We'll go alllll the way back.

**Peter Siegel**

[Singing to the tune of "John Henry"] "Oh, Peter Siegel was a little baby. He was born with mandolin on his..." No, not at all. I started playing music a long, long time ago, like mostly classical guitar and folk music, and my entrance to the scene was through the folk scene, and growing up around Pete Seeger in the Hudson Valley. That was my inspiration... you know Pete, and a lot of my inspirations from Pete, brought in so many different genres of music, One of them was playing fiddle tunes on the banjo and things like that. And through Clearwater and Pete I got connected to people like Jay Ungar and Lyn Hardy. Okay, I've gotta sidetrack a little bit. When I was very young my grandfather was an optician, he had a shop on Canal Street in New York City and my father worked for my grandfather. My grandfather was a little bit cheap and he had all these old [glasses] frames. Jay Ungar lived in Brooklyn, Jay and Lyn lived in Brooklyn, and they used to come into the shop and get the hipster wire rim frames back in the early to mid '70s and got to know my father quite a bit, gave him some albums, and my father would bring all these albums, and I just remember dancing around the room to one of their first albums. And remember [singing] "Rocky road, Cindy, rocky road town" and hearing Coleman's March on there and hearing all these tunes that I play right now. Jay was part of the Clearwater scene, which was the Pete Seeger environmental scene of the Hudson Valley that my family was a part of, too. So there was my father and knowing Jay and Lyn from Brooklyn and Canal Street. When Jay and Lynn started playing for square dances at Clearwater annual meetings and at the festivals as a little kid, I was dancing around and I always looked up at the fiddlers and thought, I really want to do that. You know, I love singing songs and it's most of what I do these days, but there's a mystique to be able to pick up an instrument and play melody on an instrument for dancing, because there was a real joy that happened at these meetings. That joy was the joy of people coming together that were doing something different and dancing. It wasn't the joy of contra dancing for the sake of contra dancing. It was the joy of a community coming together around this wonderful festive activity. As a child, that's what was in my heart, so as I got older, that stayed with me. I moved to Albany, went to college in Albany and I was hosting an open mic at a coffee house and I said, I really want to take this to the next level. I really want to start playing fiddle tunes and... I boldly asked this really cute woman that I met, she was wearing a [Galax Fiddle Festival](http://www.oldfiddlersconvention.com/) shirt. I was working at a cafe at the time too and she walked in, I said, have you ever been to Galax Fiddle Festival? She said no, but my boyfriend has, I was like, okay, cool. But I play fiddle, she said, and that was Britany Orlebeke. She was working for the state of New York and her good friend who she had met like a year before also was working in the budget office in the state of New York too... was a piano player who had played with Jim Kimball in New York. Jim Kimball ran the [Geneseo String Band](https://www.geneseo.edu/music/instrumental-ensembles) and so they were kind of rearing to play fiddle tunes, and I said I met this guy, he's kind of funny guy, Paul Rosenberg. He did tell me that if I could get my chops up, we could play for one of his kids' dances. And so at the open mic, Kristen [Brunner Hislop] and Britany and I practiced some fiddle tunes. I invited Paul down he said, oh, you'd be great for the Girl Scout dance I have next week. And so we ended up playing for this Girl Scout dance, we still have a tape of this dance. This must have been back... what, 1992 or something like that, or '93, way back... it was my last year of college and that's kind of how I got into it. Paul was a real mentor, he introduced me to the music of our neighbors, people like Peter and Mary Alice Amidon and Andy Davis and all my idols-to-be later, who I became friendly with and started playing music with.

**Julie Vallimont**

Our Brattleboro neighbors here.

**Peter Siegel**

And now those are all the tools that I use to teach kids to dance in my classroom. All the tools that the New England Dancing Masters and Mary Cay Brass also, by the way who's part of the New England Dancing Masters, those are the tools that they developed are the tools that I've been using in the classroom for the last 15 years. Being able to play music with Mary Cay and the Greenfield Dance Band would happen later. So that's how I learned, and then I decided when I was applying for graduate school, I want to be in the epicenter. I became friendly with David Kaynor, and Susie Secco, piano player... and Susan Conger, wonderful fiddler and tune writer at Ashokan, at my first year of Ashokan, and David, of course, as David would say, well, why don't just move to Montague?

**Julie Vallimont**

That's so David, and it worked on so many people.

**Peter Siegel**

It worked on so many people. I ended up going to graduate school in Keene, New Hampshire, and I moved to Montague in 1996. And he said, well, why don't you just be part of the Greenfield Dance Band? And I said, okay. That was the gentle descent into contra hell.

**Julie Vallimont**

Before I forget, just for the history books, that your band with Britany and Kristen Hislop had a name. And I'm blanking on what it was.

**Peter Siegel**

It was called the Beverwyck String Band, Beverwyck was the original Dutch name of Albany, beaver town. She was Kristen Brunner back then so that's what she is on the CD. I still love that CD that we made, Pete Sutherland produced that for us. There were really some magical moments and I think at the time, so when we first started playing someone came up to me at one of the first regular contra dances that we played was one of like Andy Spence's old songs, dances and he said, you're going to be the new Wild Asparagus. And I said, who's Wild Asparagus? I had no idea about that stuff. And truth be told the music that we were playing was very traditional. You know, Kristen is this great boom-chuck piano player and Britany just plays tunes the way they're written in a really awesome groove, and I just strummed on the mandolin, mostly, and stomped my feet. I think that at the time when music was starting to go off in different directions with the Clayfoot Strutters and Wild Asparagus, some people were really excited to see young people playing music really traditionally. So people probably would not believe that of me now, because of what I do. But I was a super traditionalist when I first started, I really just wanted to just play... just strum and stomp my feet.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think that's a good way to start a tradition, you know, like to join a tradition is to learn that tradition first before you, then you can do things with it, but you have to understand it first.

**Peter Siegel**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

So it's a good instinct to have is just to want to embrace it and do it.

**Peter Siegel**

I think it's true for any art, it's like you really want to be wonderful modern artist, you have to be able to draw a portrait. You have to be able to embrace the elemental stuff and when I learned music, even just in general, my process of learning how to play music was very historical. When I learned to play guitar, I went way back, those were the days when you had to go to the library and actually get out records and play them, and then I would do the technological thing of transferring them to tapes. I'd go there and I'd look up old Alan Lomax recordings of fiddle tunes and songs. And that's how I learned, and I learned to boom-chuck guitar fiddle tunes by listening to Woody Guthrie and listening to Doc Watson and listening to Charlie Poole, and all these old time and anyone you could name from the 1920s to present. As I developed as a musician, I went from doing that stuff and playing Dixieland jazz, and stuff like that to playing more modern jazz and more modern traditional sounds, more modern bluegrass sounds, more modern jazz sounds. I would study different people throughout the years as my musicianship developed. I'd love to create a program of learning music just purely from historical... you know, like, this is what you need to learn first, you have to listen to [Woody Guthrie playing "This Land is your Land"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxiMrvDbq3s) and master that boom-chuck.

**Julie Vallimont**

It would be interesting to see what you consider foundational, there's a lot of different paths and this is so interesting to hear people's perspectives on that. So did you start playing mandolin as a melody instrument? Was that kind of your first melody instrument in the traditional tune world?

**Peter Siegel**

 Yeah, I think it was easier to play melody on mandolin than on guitar. I was playing melody on guitar, but not at dance tempo when I was 20 years old. I was not those crackerjack musicians, who are 20 years old you see now. So mandolin was definitely the accessible one. And then later on after I practiced the shit out of, am I allowed to say that on this.......

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh we've said all sorts of things. It's cool.

**Peter Siegel**

I've practiced the scat out of the guitar. I was able to play melody and guitar quite a bit more. And I honestly, I think that development really only happened in the last 10 to 15 years for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, there's certainly technical challenges with like, flatpicking on the guitar playing melodies. It's a different kind of playing than chord planning or backup kind of stuff. So you had Beverwyck String Band? Is that where you really learned how to play for dances?

**Peter Siegel**

That's where I really learned, the first introduction.

**Julie Vallimont**

And what kind of gigs did you guys play?

**Peter Siegel**

We would do the Western New York circuit. Y'know, Rochester, Ithaca, Syracuse. We'd go up to the Adirondacks, play the Saranac Lake dance, David [Kaynor] would have us come out and be the host band for the Greenfield Dance Band when Mary Cay and Stuart [Kenney] were not around... a couple times we did that. New York City, you know, just basically the Northeast. Maybe I guess we went as far as, did we go as far as DC, I don't know. But basically, the Northeast circuit and Britany and Kristen were definitely like... they loved playing music but they didn't really want to do dance camps. They didn't really want to go beyond the sort of like occasional weekends of doing things. And that was great, and that's kind of why I ended up moving into other areas as well.

**Julie Vallimont**

So what years was this when you were traveling around New York State playing?

**Peter Siegel**

That was the '90s, probably from like, 1993 to '98 or so.

**Julie Vallimont**

So funny, because I was in college then in Ithaca, going to Cornell. I grew up south of Rochester, so this is like my home turf, but I didn't know about contra dancing. I had never heard of it in my entire life. You probably came and played a dance like right near me.

**Peter Siegel**

I'm sure I did.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's just so funny, we have all these things in common like between being environmentally minded educators and music and stuff, it's just one more funny thing.

**Peter Siegel**

 I know, so many connections.

**Julie Vallimont**

 There's so many paths that I almost crossed with back in the '90s when I was around in New York State and Maine and didn't know about dancing and all the people I could have met who I met way later anyway.

**Peter Siegel**

Isn't that encouraging though? I mean, just off the topic of everything, it's encouraging to know that in the ethos, and everywhere, there are people around you who you will connect with. And there are people that will share those things. You don't know them now, they're all there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right? If you ever feel lonely or like your neighborhood's boring, maybe there's just something there you don't know about yet.

**Peter Siegel**

You just need a pandemic to bring the neighbors together.

**Julie Vallimont**

You have a whole concert series from your porch, so. I do enjoy having a project that gives me an excuse to get together with people and talk to them, because I might forget to do that otherwise. You know, like the folks at the Rochester contra dance when I first played there, I was like, how long has dance been running? I don't know, decades, like the whole time. My grandparents lived right around the corner from that neighborhood and I didn't even know it existed.

**Peter Siegel**

The thing that I learned from... I think it really was traveling mostly in New York State, from that experience, was just how much of a community and how generous people were, letting you stay in their houses and hosting you, giving you breakfast in the morning, and that was all really new to me and pretty cushy... to pull into a town you've never been in before and stay in someone's nice little suburban home and just tool around town the whole afternoon and play a dance. I mean, that's a wonderful thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

They want to make you their favorite egg recipes or their best pancakes, or they get 20 kinds of cheese at the grocery store. And I'm like, yes, please. It's wonderful to be welcomed into a community like that... you really make lasting friendships that way. Not all gigs are like that. If you're doing a gig in a club, you don't get that kind of treatment, necessarily.

**Peter Siegel**

Sometimes, if it's a special club.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or if you have musician friends in town, musicians often stay with other musicians and organizers and stuff.

**Peter Siegel**

Yes. There's different kinds of love that people give you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely. So anyway, I got sidetracked about New York. When did you really start playing fiddle tunes with Jay Ungar, for example?

**Peter Siegel**

I think, well, I sort of reconnected with Jay by going to Ashokan in... that was probably '93 or '94.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was that [Northern Week](https://ashokancenter.org/northern-week-online/)?

**Peter Siegel**

It was Northern Week. I think that moment was the moment where I met David and Susie and Susan... David Kaynor, and that was the blossoming, that was sort of like, oh my god, and that's where I was really, truly introduced to Québécois music, and I think the first week I was there the bands were Nightingale and.... was it Nightingale or was it Wild Asparagus? They rotated each year at that time, I think one year it would be Nightingale and one year Wild Asparagus. It just was jaw-dropping to me. It was just like, oh my god, I love this. At Ashokan, Molly Mason really showed me the rock solid ways of walking the bass on the guitar and things like that. I remember sitting down with Keith Murphy, I really didn't know him very well at the time. I think he gave me like a 10-minute lesson. I don't know if this is the story of music for you, but it is for me, in that my whole life I've never really taken consistent lessons, except for when I was in college, and I studied classical guitar, but my whole life is 10-minute or five minute snippets with very good musicians telling me one thing that stick with me for a very long time. And that's what Ashokan was for me that week too, sitting down with Molly Mason, sitting down with Keith Murphy. And I think some of the Québécois musicians... Guy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Guy Bouchard?

**Peter Siegel**

 Is that his last name? I think so. The guy named Guy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was it 52 Below 27 Below? I'm bad at numbers. [It's Thirty Below.]

**Peter Siegel**

I'm not sure. I can't remember. As far as Jay Ungar goes, I've orbited around that world for my whole life and I would see him at Clearwater festival every year too. And I remember seeing Ruthy [Ungar Merenda], she's probably five or six years younger than me, and so I was probably 15 and she'd be 10, running around.

**Julie Vallimont**

Now from [The Mammals](http://www.themammals.love/). She has a quite successful band in her own right. Wow. So many people have had these kind of moments at Ashokan. It's like Jay and Molly have really built a community where they've been doing it long enough that you've got a kind of generation of contra musicians who learned a lot there.

**Peter Siegel**

Many generations because you know, Noah and Andrew were there well after I'd even ever attended Ashokan and then there were generations before me too. So it is multiple generations for sure. I think there's an even younger generation after Noah and Andrew. There are magical things about different camps, and Ashokan has this very special kind of magic that of course, is part of a cult of personality of Jay and Molly. It's like they just set that tone that's incredibly friendly and makes it almost like a 24-hour vaudeville show. Or I should say Borscht Belt show, because we are kind of in the Borscht Belt when you're there, and Jay really naturally is, and that's why I relate to him so much, being another Jew from New York, the whole Borscht Belt thing, and that's what really makes it so special. I went back to Ashokan last year for the first time in like 10 or 15 years, or maybe eight years or something, and I hadn't really been part of the new campus and stuff, but as soon as I walked in it was all the same people that had been there, like eight years before. And you know you love to see new people but it's so reassuring to see how much they feel a part of that community that Jay and Molly have developed that they just keep coming back every year.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely, and they bring their families, and it's like what you do, it's when you reconnect with everyone.

**Peter Siegel**

Oh and side note, I went to Ashokan in the fifth grade when it was in environmental camp. That was my first big woods experience. You talk about like convergence, right? lt was an environmental camp, it is an environmental camp still, run by SUNY New Paltz back then, and I was in the suburbs of New York, and that was my five-day experience, was going and staying in a cabin at Ashokan. And so when I went back for the first time, in 1993, it was so magical to see this place that I hadn't seen since I was in the fifth grade. And that's not, you know... sort of a coincidence, but sort of not.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean there's times when you feel like, things in your life are all falling together. I don't know if I believe about things being meant to be, but certainly this is a place in my life that is, like, you're kind of meant to be there in a way, you know, all these things drawing you to this place and the way it impacts your life.

**Peter Siegel**

Totally. And I am a believer in... I'm not in the spiritual sense... I still let the mystery be. But I feel like you know, your heart brings you to certain places and there's a reason why Ashokan was there and I had this very visceral experience in the fifth grade doing something completely different that has a lot to do with what where my heart wants to go. So no coincidence there.

**Julie Vallimont**

 And honestly, I think that's why so many of us make lifelong friends in the dance and music community, because all of our hearts are bringing us together there for the same reasons. And then when you meet people who have all these hearts in common, it's just so natural to just become friends with them. It's more than just an activity, you meet people who just have joy in the same things and like minded philosophies in life and that's a really special thing. And that's why I think that won't go away even if we all forgot how to contra dance, the dancing is the foil that brings us together. When you have deep-seated roots in a community like that it'll come back. It definitely will.

**Peter Siegel**

It will, and maybe with a vengeance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, everyone's gonna have all this pent up joy, energy, and other emotions.

**Peter Siegel**

This weekend I was just experiencing a little bit of that because one of the scenes I'm a part of is a conscious dance scene and it's moving to beautiful music, a lot of it is just drumming and stuff like that. It was an outdoor thing where everyone's at a distance. But the vibe there is just so... it's so there because so many people are just craving that. I feel that contra dancing, when it comes back, it's just gonna be that incredible intensity that I felt this weekend dancing with these people. I think contra dancers maybe could take a lesson from that and maybe take up a little bit of another kind of dancing that they don't have to do just for this interim period.

**Julie Vallimont**

Something that you can do a little spaced out from other people.

**Peter Siegel**

Do it outside. Yeah, there's some really wonderful things that are going on in our region.

**Julie Vallimont**

What is that dancing called? I've heard it called ecstatic dance.

**Peter Siegel**

Ecstatic dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

 The only times I've been to ecstatic dance were at Burning Man. It was pretty incredible, very soulful and energy-filled with the most surreal backdrops that you've ever seen.

**Peter Siegel**

Yeah, sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

I can talk about that and totally derail this entire conversation.

**Peter Siegel**

I know, we're so easily derailable.

**Julie Vallimont**

Let's talk a little bit about the Greenfield Dance Band then. You met David, you ended up moving up here, started playing with the band. What were those years like?

**Peter Siegel**

Well, it was wonderful and a lot of pressure, not pressure in like, oh, my god, I have to keep up with this. Mary Cay and Stuart went back 15 years before I got there. They were tight. They had their very, very tight thing that they did. David really welcomed me into the band. And I wouldn't say that Mary Cay and Stuart did not welcome me into the band, but suddenly there was a new person in the band. And they had to accommodate me and so I had a learning curve. I think a lot of my style developed around Mary Cay's piano playing and Stuart's solid bass playing, you play anything around, of course. And Mary Cay is solid as anything too, but that experience was an experience in filling space. You know, it's like on the one and the three, or whatever. And Mary Cay is doing these syncopated things on the piano and a boom-chuck... what am I going to do on the mandolin or the guitar that's not going to be redundant? I think that's a lesson that I often teach people when when I'm teaching about playing for contra dance. It's about there's the bass here, there's the piano here, you're playing a stringed instrument, how are you going to counterbalance that? And that was really what I learned in that environment. The wonderful thing is that the beauty of the Greenfield Dance Band was that fiddlers would rotate in and out and there was no one fiddler. It was David and the three of us at the time, and Michael Kerry for some time as well, great mandolin and guitar player who now lives in the Boston area. But mostly the core was the four of us at the time, and it was different people throughout the years, I guess for about, I would say 10-15 years, we were the core and then there'd be like, incredible fiddlers joining us. I mean, Rodney Miller, Lissa Schneckenberger, Russ Barenberg would come and play guitar with us too. You name a fiddler that plays for contra dances, and they were part of the band. That's how I got to know Naomi Morse. That's how I got to know...I don't know, just basically say the name of a fiddler, they probably rotated through. It was every other Fridays, and then the fifth Friday as well, second, fourth, and fifth Fridays and it was an education in all these incredible styles, and to be a part of accommodating the fiddler, you're just the bed behind the sit-in fiddler who's with us — I should say Susan Conger, too — and then of course, when when Mary Cay wasn't there.... Any time that Stuart and Mary Cay wouldn't be there there'd be other musicians too. So maybe it would just be me and Stuart and Susie Secco or me and Stuart and Bob McQuillen. You know, it was amazing.

**Julie Vallimont**

As far as a musical education you could get, I mean, that's amazing. It sounds like so much fun.

**Peter Siegel**

So much fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

 I used to sit on stage and watch you guys and just listen. That was when I was a new dancer and then a new musician and Greenfield Dance Band was just so fun to watch. And the atmosphere was always so convivial onstage, people hanging out.

**Peter Siegel**

That was David setting that tone and he insisted on and probably Mary Cay talked about this as well. But just David's insistence on I would say two main things. One was that always having chairs in the back for people to sit in and play along with the band, and the other thing was no one sitting at the door to collect money. The money, it was just the fiddle case open with a suggested donation that made people feel like they could pay what they want and sometimes that resulted in a lot more money sometimes resulted in a lot less money [laughing]. But that was David's loving insistence and inclusion.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is there no one at the door so that no one knows how much you paid? You can have some, like privacy around that or?

**Peter Siegel**

Yeah, I think.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or just because it feels more organic and welcoming that way instead of like a greeter gatekeeper person?

**Peter Siegel**

I guess David could tell you that. And we It was a source of debate between me and Mary Cay, and Stuart and David. So if we would say, well, it'd be nice to have someone at the door, because people like to look at someone when they're walking in. David, he didn't argue about it too much. But there was something base that... he really felt people really needed to just not have the pressure of having to pay, that people could pay nothing if they want, but they didn't have to tell someone that they're paying nothing. And then there were the beginner nights. I don't know if Mary Cay talked about the beginner nights... and so about every six months, David would have a beginners night and it would be completely free for anyone to walk in between seven and eight o'clock, the fiddle case would be closed until eight o'clock. And we would do a huge beginners workshop with the dance and sometimes we would have, you know, 50 to 75 people just show up that had never contra danced before. And then open up the fiddle case and the money would pour in. Sometimes we would make a ton of money because we didn't outright ask for money. But people were so gracious about being able to learn contra dancing that they would just throw money in anyway even though it was technically free to all the beginners. That comes from the heart that David put into the Guiding Star Grange in the first place. Back in the late '70s, early '80s he was fostering that feeling for the Guiding Star Grange. There were 10 people showing up to his dance and that was the only dance. There was the Northfield dance and his dance and no one was showing up and he just was so welcoming that eventually hundreds and hundreds of people would be showing up to the dance, and then Wild Asparagus ended up with the first Saturdays and now there's not a night that a dance doesn't happen at the Guiding Star Grange, but that was David's work. And so having these beginner's nights and not asking for money, I think was an extension of the work that he put in to make the Guiding Star Grange what it is today.

**Julie Vallimont**

Really building something from the ground up. A lot of David's ideas when we started the [BIDA](https://www.bidadance.org/) dance in Boston, we drew on a lot of those ideas, like sit-in friendly dances and having a sliding scale. I don't like student rates at dances, or I just think it's really not about whether someone's a student or not. It's about whether they have money or not. I don't want to geek out about dance organizing philosophy, that's not what this podcast is about. He just does so many things to make you feel welcome. I had the great pleasure a couple of years when I was at Ashokan on staff, playing piano for his morning New England jam. Those are just some of my favorite moments. He's just so welcoming to everyone, regardless of ability, he makes everyone feel good and sound good. Regardless of what their musical ability is.

**Peter Siegel**

It's so true. The most recent great joy that I had was last year at Ashokan which was his last year, I had the chance to host that New England Jam with David all week. And I think that was a gift from Jay. Jay hadn't had me in like eight years. When I saw him at the Flurry and he said to me, do you want to come to Ashokan this year? I think because he had the feeling that this would likely be David's last year. And it was and so being able to be there with David and a group of 20 people playing these New England chestnuts, I will savor that moment for as long as possible. I mean, there's just nothing like it, nothing. I mean, he has such a passion for the dorkiest, most wonderful tunes and I just access the inner dork and the inner... almost classical musician because the musicianship of some of the New England tunes that are in E-flat or F you know, some of the things that he has mastered, B-flat tunes that are really hard to play. I mean, he just plays them from the heart and and he makes them accessible for everyone.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, and he's very self-effacing. He'd be like, oh, let me see if I still have this one in my fingers... [laughing]

**Peter Siegel**

[Laughing.] That was up until last summer.

**Julie Vallimont**

So what were some of those tunes that you remember in that jam session?

**Peter Siegel**

Things like Ross's Reel, Batchelder's [Reel], Dominion, Little Burnt Potato, Colraine. Boy, on and on. Actually, you know last week on my show I had George Wilson, and he's also a fiddle hero. He was my fiddle hero of Albany and that's one of the reasons I had him on is because I really just wanted to play those tunes of George Wilson's, such a wonderful dorky tune player.

**Julie Vallimont**

Why don't you tell us the name of your show quick so that we can put it in the episode Notes.

**Peter Siegel**

Oh, it's "[Live from Brattleboro](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQjwN-gnO6MV_AiPbZ8mNpg)."

**Julie Vallimont**

 "Live from Brattleboro," we'll link to it.

**Peter Siegel**

There's YouTube and Facebook for as long as Facebook will have us.

**Julie Vallimont**

For good COVID musical entertainment. There was a tune, oh man I'm embarrassed I can't remember the name. They're all these charming tunes like chickens in them. It was like chicken and something feet.

**Peter Siegel**

 Hen's feet and...

**Julie Vallimont**

 Hen's feet and cabbage?

**Peter Siegel**

And carrots. Hen's Feet and Carrots.

**Julie Vallimont**

Carrots!

**Peter Siegel**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

I did not know that tune. And they're like, what? You don't know Hen's Feet and Carrots? But in the most loving way. "Well, let's play it, it's a glorious tune." You can play that tune. I had been playing for a few years at that point and I'd played a bunch of contra dances around the country. But that doesn't mean you know all this repertoire. And it's like when you go to other sit in bands, and no one's playing it. It's hard to learn it. And so getting to play with David and learning a lot of these tunes, it's just.....

**Peter Siegel**

It's incredible. And the other extension of that was that it was probably back in 2000... it was 2002, because it was right after 9/11. David asked if I would join the staff at [the John C. Campbell Folk School Dance Musicians Week](https://blog.folkschool.org/2020/07/13/dance-musicians-week-instructors-host-virtual-events-this-week/) in North Carolina. And every year since then, I've been doing dance musicians week with him. And the people who've rotated in and out of that were, well, [Susie Secco and Susan Conger](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQuEwV-OHUE) and then Naomi Morse came in for a bit. The staff now is Betsy Branch and [Sue Songer](https://www.cdss.org/lifetime-contribution-award-main/2019-lifetime-contributor-sue-songer). But the joy of that week is that people who take that class are David Kaynor lovers and they just eat up those tunes. So it was a whole week of just playing for the greatest dancing every night of the week and just playing these old New England tunes that I don't often get to play these days.

**Julie Vallimont**

So wonderful. And the Greenfield Dance Band had a repertoire of pretty local traditional tunes, things from Quebec, Ireland, New England, you know?

**Peter Siegel**

 It really just depended on the fiddler, mostly, and if it was just me and David and Mary Cay and Stuart, which it was at times. It would be, Temperance [Reel], and Fisher's Hornpipe and a lot of Shetland and Cape Breton tunes, things like Da Tushkar and Millbrae and Miss Susan Cooper and tunes from Canada, and stuff like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of those tunes are found in the Portland Collections. David has spent a lot of time out on the West Coast. So I'm sure he has a pretty strong contra influence out there.

**Peter Siegel**

Yeah, David has his pockets. It's the Northwest, Western New York. He spread things quite a bit.

**Julie Vallimont**

 He spent time in Maine.

**Peter Siegel**

Yes, he's got his roots in Maine. We'll keep on playing them. I don't know if you wanted to move on... the next step was the [Gaslight Tinkers](http://new.thegaslighttinkers.com/). And it was my goal, the Gaslight Tinkers, we were not a contra dance band. But the tunes, this ties in with what we're talking about, I always insisted that the tunes that we would play, even if we play them non-traditionally, the tunes we would play would be the basic old tunes. And we wouldn't be writing tunes and dredging up obscure tunes that no one knows for the sake of it. We be playing tunes like Fisher's Hornpipe and we'd be playing dorky jigs, but we'd be doing Afrobeat and and Caribbean sounds and jazz sounds behind those very classic tunes, because to me the tunes are what holds that tradition. We started with a fiddler named Zoë Darrow, who was a mostly Cape Breton-style fiddler and Scottish fiddler, and she'd do these really great old Scottish tunes but there was not a lot of improvisation in the fiddling, she just stuck to it and just kicked ass on these really trad tunes. And again, I'm not a preservationist. I don't believe that things need to be set in stone stylistically, like a lot of old time musicians and bluegrass musicians and Irish musicians feel but I do feel like you do need to hold on to some element that really ties it to the tradition and really honor that tradition. And in this case it's the tune itself. Everything you do behind the tune could be anything. But the tune is holding that tradition and so I started the Gaslight Tinkers with a bass player named Garrett Sawyer who I met through Anna Patton, when she was doing a recording project.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love these tunes, I hope people keep playing these tunes. A lot of contra albums have been recorded at Northfire [Garrett's recording studio].

**Peter Siegel**

He's a brilliant studio technician and mixer and producer and he had a history of playing with all sorts of reggae, Afrobeat, Caribbean bands... he spent a lot of time in Trinidad developing his chops. He started a band called [the Alchemystics](http://alchemystics.com/), which was basically a reggae, funk, jazz, improvisational rap... everything band, and they were in the club scene, and they're a fantastic band and known in the Connecticut Valley here all over, hundreds of people would come out to hear them play. Garrett was getting sick of that scene. Not sick of the music but sick of like, there's drugs and there was contention, and egos and all that stuff. He was recording all these traditional albums, people like Anna Patton, Mary Lea. You recorded there, Julie, right? I mean, a lot of people have recorded Northfire and he was taking in all this music and he was connected to it anyway, because he grew up with his parents going English country dancing, so he knew the music, it wasn't like it was foreign to him. For those of you that that have never seen a picture of Garrett, Garrett is this very tall, lanky guy with dreadlocks who lives off the land in Wendell [MA] and if you saw him you might expect him to get pulled over for something, but he's actually a total vegan, never smoked pot, never drank in his entire life and teaches physics at the [PVPA](http://www.pvpa.org/) right now, at the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts School. Garrett, really wanting to shift his musical world and into like, my musical world at the same time, we kind of met and said let's do something, let's do something that brings together the generations and gives people joy and makes people want to dance. At the time, I was doing a lot of singer songwriter gigs. I had an agent that worked with Peggy Seeger and Si Khan. and I was doing a lot of colleges and touring, and I was playing for people who were twice my age. I was getting a little sick of it. And he was playing for people who were his age or younger, and I said, okay, I want your crowd, you want my crowd, let's bring our crowds together. So we got together with Zoë Darrow, this wonderful fiddler and we started the Gaslight Tinkers and it was an instant success, like we were packing the Iron Horse and playing festivals and things like that. Gary was like, I really want to play contra dances, and I was like, I play so many contra dances I don't know if I want to do contra dances in this band. He's like, but I really, I just, it's so much fun and it you just go and you play and people give you money and they treat you well, and they're not drinking and blah, blah, blah. And I was like, okay, I'll do it. So we played a couple of contra dances and we turned on a lot of people and we turned off a lot of people at the same time because we are loud or then... I shouldn't say loud, we're not loud. We are the quietest band at any real festival that we play. But in the land of the folk musician and the contra dancer, we are loud, because there's drums and bass and I play electric guitar, mostly Afrobeat-style electric guitar, but not super loud, just what you'd hear at a festival. So we turned off a lot of the the diehard dancers and folkies but turned on a lot of diehard dancers and folkies too and a lot of younger people really dug what we were doing. I think we both split the contra dance crowd and also brought the contra dance crowd together in some ways too. But in the real world, outside of contra dancing, we were bringing a lot of people together, like you go to one of our concerts and there would be 15-, 16-, 17-year olds dancing, and there would be 80-year-old people dancing as well and singing along to our songs. So that was my goal. And that's really what I always wanted to do, was taking old songs and old tunes and tinkering with them to bring in all sorts of traditions in a completely genuine way.

**Julie Vallimont**

But using these tunes as a building block, I think a lot of new bands, or bands want to be cool... they look for obscure tunes, or cutting edge tunes as a way of being cooler than everybody else. So I think that's a really interesting approach is to take these classic tunes but they come out completely differently when you have these different grooves and sounds under them.

**Peter Siegel**

They do. We were talking about dorky tunes before, especially dorky jigs — the thing about a dorky jig, and I'm sure you think about this, Julie, because you think this way, too, is that a dorky jig, in so many ways, is as close as you could get to playing a 12-bar blues, in many cases. You can play these dorky jigs and basically put a [sings a blues riff] behind it. And you come full circle, and it becomes the coolest tune in the world once you put a different rhythm behind it. You give it a whole different aesthetic, and so you end up looking at these exact same tunes from a completely different angle by underlying something different rhythmically behind it.

**Julie Vallimont**

So in terms of like, being a dance musician, I don't know how much the Tinkers have played for dances, I've certainly seen you guys playing at Falcon Ridge or wherever. I know that's not the main thing you do in that band. But what's your experience like being a dance musician back in the days of Greenfield Dance Band or something more traditional, versus in Gaslight Tinkers, how do you play to the dancers? And what's your philosophy?

**Peter Siegel**

A lot of it is the same, we look at the dancers, and we think about what the dancers want. We're sitting on stage, the caller says to us, this dance is bouncy. And with the Gaslight Tinkers, we think, okay, well this set of tunes that we've done before would go really well with this dance. When I was with the Greenfield Dance Band, we'd say the same thing. The difference is that the tunes that we choose, so maybe a set of certain kind of tunes in the Greenfield Dance Band that suit the the dance aesthetic, the Gaslight Tinkers we might say, well, this one would sound really good with reggae. Or this one would sound really good with some some Soca Calypso behind it or this one would be really good if we just play straight old time sound right now. We do that in the Greenfield Dance Band, too. Is this good for old time? Is this good for jigs? I think with the Gaslight Tinkers it's like, ooh, we're rubbing our hands together. Let's try that obscure Puerto Rican rhythm that we just studied. Let's do that. I wonder if we could do that. It's just like scheming as to how could we get the dancers to begin to shake their hips while they're dancing. The thing about contra dancing is contra dancing is basically your feet moving, you're basically walking around and that's cool. I often joke like, when we're playing for something, I'm like, oh my god, these people are looking down at their hips are going, what's happening to my hips? They're moving. Good heavens!

**Julie Vallimont**

I have things inside me I didn't know I had!

**Peter Siegel**

So yeah, that's really it.

**Julie Vallimont**

It must be fun to watch that happen on the dance floor.

**Peter Siegel**

Yeah, it's really fun. The goal, I think as a musician that's been around as long as I have, is that I don't really want to be gimmicky. It's like a lot of people will listen to what we do and be like, oh, they're trying to do this or they're trying to do that, but we really do choose tunes and aesthetics based on what the dances are and we genuinely play, like we're playing Soca Calypso, like we went to Trinidad and really played with Soca Calypso bands in Trinidad. We're not just like... pulling out some weird genres that we're like, oh, we heard that let's overlay this. Garrett has brought in these traditions, truly brought in the traditions. Our new member I-Shea, who mostly sings but plays hand percussion, her roots are from the Dominican Republic and growing up in Washington Heights and she plays a lot of Latin music. She sings when we play for dances and that is real. She really is bringing a tradition into it. And my tradition is more of the contra dance tradition, but I did a lot of work listening to a lot of Afrobeat guitar to try to get what I do on the guitar to sound genuinely Afrobeat when I'm doing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

So there's some kind of respect there and a little bit of depth of what you're trying to do. It's not just like, oh, let's have this influence that I heard on this album. It's like you're studying it in enough depth that you can hopefully do it well.

**Peter Siegel**

And then that harkens back to my original influence, which is Pete Seeger. Because that's what he would do. I basically always ask myself, what would Pete do? Some people know Pete as a traditional banjo player, the guy who worked with Alan Lomax, they think of him as a civil rights activist, they think of him as the guy that sings "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?", or the guy that sings "If I had a Hammer," or whatever, but what Pete really was, was he was a guy who respected a million different traditions and was always learning and that's why he would be singing a song be like, we're gonna sing a song in Swahili now. It's like, okay, everyone, you know, like, I just learned this from some folks in South Africa and he will 100% be respecting that tradition. He will be reworking traditional songs into something that is culturally relevant for the whole world and not just the white middle class people that are sitting there and listening to him at the moment. And that's really what I've always wanted to do with every kind of music I play and I feel like the Gaslight Tinkers are a culmination of that. It's like the Gaslight Tinkers to me are, what would Pete do?

**Julie Vallimont**

It's interesting how, like, a lot of your philosophy in life as a musician has come from that place. So I'm going to ask you a question that Julie The Human would never ask you. But I gotta ask you as an interviewer, as a devil's advocate question, which is, does that kind of stuff belong in contra dancing? Or why?

**Peter Siegel**

I love questions like that. Does it belong in contra dancing? I guess I would ask back: does it not belong in contra dancing? The thing about tradition is that I really feel like tradition... "tradition" is any given person's perception of what happened back then. Right? I mean basically, like old time musicians sit around playing a certain way. And they go, oh, well, you can't play it like that because they just don't, you don't play guitar like that on this tune. The only reason they believe that is because of a bunch of field recordings that were dug up by folks back in the '20s and '30s. You know, and there are so many ways that people approached music back then, that were so much more fluid than people who are in the present, looking at what they consider to be traditional and contra dance music over the years has involved horns. Someone gave me a cassette tape of a square/contra dance from Lake Pleasant [MA], which is in Montague, right by Montague from the early 60s. And it was a piano, a trumpet, and a fiddle and some other instrument I couldn't identify. It was not what you would consider to be traditional at all, but it was the frickin '60s, it was pre-contra dance revival. I mean, I can wax about this forever actually, I feel like people get stuck in what is familiar to them and what they believe the tradition is. And I might be digressing here, but I want to tell a quick story. So years ago, I won a singer-songwriter contest through a local radio station and the one of the prizes was to be on eTown in Colorado, and so they flew me out to Colorado to be on eTown, this syndicated show that is wonderful and the guests on the show were John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers and Judy Collins and me. I wasn't that famous back then. But I was like, I'm with John Cohen, Judy Collins and we're hanging out in the back. And I started talking to John Cohen about being in in New York City during the folk revival. And actually, and now I have to backtrack, a few months before that I was doing a house concert at Hedy West's house. She's the person who wrote "500 Miles." She was from North Georgia and she had a certain way of playing the banjo from North Georgia. And after the house concerts I sat up with her and talked to her all about what it was like to be around Bob Dylan and be around the New Lost City Ramblers the '60s and she said, well, it was a little weird, you know, Bob Dylan was a weirdo and she said, oh, the New Lost City Ramblers, John Cohen. He told me I didn't know how to play the banjar. She called it a banjar, she said, I have this three finger style and he came up to me in 1961 and said, Hedy, you don't know how to play the banjo, that's not traditional from Georgia. And she said, my grandma taught me to play the banjo. And so when I was on eTown I said to John, ever hear of someone named Hedy West and he went, oh, Hedy West, she's such a grump! My point being that John Cohen and Mike Seeger and the New Lost City Ramblers were the original old time music revivalists that set the way that we play old time music in stone for a lot of our friends who play old time music. And they told this woman who grew up with the banjo in Georgia, that she didn't know how to play banjo, according to her, you know, at least that's what her perception was. She felt like she wasn't being accepted in the New York City scene as a genuine banjo player.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, that happens to so many folk revivals, that you redefine what the thing is that you are reinventing. You're reinventing it in defining what it used to be. Wow, what a story.

**Peter Siegel**

Yeah, it's funny and also the other thing about that story is meeting these people... Hedy West who wrote "500 Miles" and I don't think she's ever written another song and five people showed up to her house for the house concert but I got to sit up all night and talk to her. About her funny existence back in the '60s.

**Julie Vallimont**

What an interesting world to be in where your song takes on this whole new life out of your world. And you're told you don't know how to play the banjo and you're just watching everything be like, what?

**Peter Siegel**

Exactly, she's kind of a legend and yet she's being told that she's not in the tradition.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like, she got traditionsplained. Maybe we won't go into mansplaining now, but maybe traditionsplaining is also a thing.

**Peter Siegel**

It's definitely a thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Whether it's men or not doing it we won't go into right now.

**Peter Siegel**

Often is though.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Yeah, you can say that.

**Peter Siegel**

Although I've been traditionsplained by a lot of women too have to say.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, goes around. Wait, you know, I've never thought about what my personal definition of tradition would be especially within the context of contra dance. I've tried to respect whatever I think it is. I mean, it's kind of an interesting question, like, as someone who's tried to be a respectful piano player and learn the contra dance tradition but doesn't really have a definition for what that means to me, except to seek out the people who are doing it in a way that resonates with me and then to try to learn from them and also let it filter through my own style and desires.

**Peter Siegel**

Well, speaking as someone that knows your playing well, I think you are true to the tradition and expand in quite amazing and groovy ways.

**Julie Vallimont**

I guess that is being true to the tradition.

**Peter Siegel**

It is.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is to expand on it in your own groovy ways. Because, like everyone who plays in this tradition adds something to it, and enriches it as long as you respect the core, maybe tradition is also a bunch of things we all have in common already. I didn't think about this very hard so I might have a better explanation for this later, I'm totally talking off the cuff here. I think the contra tradition is like a bunch of tunes we all have in common and a bunch of moves that we all know how to do. But that can change and grow and expand. We've talked about how there are a lot of dances that were not traditional back then and you know,various dances where are the actives active? Are there inactives or not? Dances change, choreographies change, music has changed. So why not bring in influences from around the globe? It doesn't have to be from New England to be traditional.

**Peter Siegel**

And I think at the core, not accepting outside influences and accepting that things change is really just people not being able to accept change in general. I do think that people find comfort in hearing something or experiencing something the way they first heard it. And so, you know, I can respect that too. That's why I still like to play very traditional music because when I hear a Bob McQuillen boom-chuck piano player playing behind a really great... like, Randy Miller playing just straight old fiddle tunes that gets to a place in my heart. And that smell, as Dudley Laufman would say, the smell of the hall as you walk in, and the shuffle of the feet with the boom-chuck piano, you know, it's like that's amazing. I still love that and I do feel like, the dogmatic person in me feels like people have got to experience that too. Like, you can hold these two things.

**Julie Vallimont**

We don't want to lose one, it would be so sad if the David Kaynor style of fiddle playing with just very rhythmic bowing and effortless harmonies and delightful collection of tunes. Like, there's no callers who can fiddle and call at the same time. Not that many. I don't want to say no, because I'm sure there's some out there but not on the national.... I'm not qualified to really evaluate the calling scene. But the callers like David, he's got hundreds and hundreds of dances in his head. He doesn't need cards to call. He can call and fiddle at the same time. Most people can't even talk and fiddle at the same time. Much less call a dance and fiddle at the same time. And he tells stories from the microphone, you know, wonderful folksy stories. But that's not what all dancers want. Some people want a quick efficient walkthrough with as few words as possible and then they want like really proficient music. You can play fiddle more proficiently when you're not also calling at the same time. You know, things like that. You can focus more on your tone and improvising with the band if the band's doing complicated arrangements or crazy improvisations, you can't be calling at the same time while you're doing all that.

**Peter Siegel**

Right. Right. Right. I think that that there's something you say about old time music, and I also say it about the Grateful Dead, which is that it's better than it sounds. And there's something to that, because I think that people have gotten used to a certain level of proficiency, and I think that level of proficiency also comes at the deficit of soul. I love the rough edges of a band when they're just sawing away. I love the rough edges of like, the Grateful Dead, when they're just like, forgetting words and stuff like that, you know, I love old time music that just kind of goes on and on and on, and it's totally rusty and scratchy. There's soul in that music. And I think that people really need to appreciate that... if I could be dogmatic about one thing I would say, just look past the cleanliness and look past the Chris Thile "diddle diddle diddle I could play perfectly" and is their heart in it? And there is real heart in just good old New England fiddling and boom-chuck piano playing. It's really there, that is what we need to keep in the music. I do think though, that even the Gaslight Tinkers, we get there sometimes, I love just like staying on one groove and being really scratchy and just trying to be as rough as possible just for the sake of being as rough as possible. I know I'm very stream of consciousness here but I think that one of the things that's happened over the last 15 years, for better and for worse is that we've had this wonderful influx of young musicians, a lot of whom are Berklee and New England Conservatory graduates and people like that who can play the shit out of their instruments and they're fantastic. But their abilities often precede their heart. And I'm not knocking them... but I'm going to say that I think that they develop the heart. It's not that the heart doesn't develop later but I think that ability in more recent times has often come first before the heart. I know a ton of musicians that in the last 10 or 15 years have really grown into being heartfelt players. But I think because of all these people being produced from these great colleges and being able to play their instruments so well it has raised the bar on what the dancers and what listeners really expect to hear. And so when they hear someone who can't quite play their instrument as proficiently as some 21 year old, who's just out of NEC, to them, it's like, that person doesn't play as well. And it's often an analysis based on ability. I think that some people who just don't know the music, analyze it... and I hear that a lot. I hear like, oh, that band is not as good as that band. What do you mean, they play with such heart, they're such a great band. And the band that they're talking about that's great is a great band. But they're great because they can play 1000 chords and a million notes. Like, that's why they're great and that doesn't make them better, it just makes them very able.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, genre aside, to me, one of the things that defines a good contra dance band is are you paying attention to the dancers, and giving them what they need to do the dance? There's a lot of different ways to do that. And you get the most virtuosic people doing all these things, but somehow they're not locking in with the dancers. Like they don't know what that magic is, that rhythmic foundation that the dancers need, or the way you bow the fiddle or the kind of tunes you're playing. I don't know. I'm not even thinking of anyone in mind particularly who I'm like, oh, they don't do it.

**Peter Siegel**

 I'm not either.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm not trying to say that, but it's just as an abstract concept. We do have a lot of friends in the contra scene who have gone to Berklee or NEC and they're great, but they come into dancing with respect and they also contra dance and they want to be dance musicians.

**Peter Siegel**

I think really what I'm saying is not that those people that are wonderful musicians have a deficit, per se, I'm saying that the people who don't come out of NEC or Berklee or are a really well-trained musician from the age of two, are just as good, but in a very different way, and have this heart that often as a dancer doesn't get noticed because dancers are really tuned into groove and they're tuned into to what they're feeling in the moment when they're dancing. I think of someone who has all of those things someone like Rodney Miller, for instance, Rodney Miller has incredible chops, and then he's also got incredible soul and of course people who just, the greatest musicians you just feel it. And you're like, holy crap, look at what you're doing. That's amazing. And then there's someone like Jay Ungar who, he's a great freakin' fiddler, but he's very simple. He's a very simple fiddler, simple and elemental fiddler and that's what makes him incredible. He just knows how to slide into those notes and stay behind the beat just perfectly, where you're just like in that pocket. Blah, blah, blah, I could talk about this for hours.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well we could I mean, that's the fun thing is that there's not like a right answer, you know, just different things to explore and consider. Do you ever dance? Were you a big dancer for awhile?

**Peter Siegel**

Big dancer. My first experience in Brattleboro was driving up from Albany to the Dawn Dance. So I loved dancing and the joy of dancing goes back to the first story of me at a [Clearwate](https://www.clearwaterfestival.org/)r event, square dancing and contra dancing with my parents to Jay and Lyn. So that's really important to me. I love, love dancing. I think that in more recent years, I'm drawn more to freeform dancing and just being able to fully move my body. I still enjoy contra dancing, when I'm at a dance weekend, I always will dance and go out there on the floor. But I often don't seek it out in non-COVID times when I have free time because I'm in the dance hall playing for dances every other week or whatever once a month. I'm gonna do something else, some other kind of dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that happens to a lot of dance musicians, where they stop dancing as much just because they're already in that environment so much. It's great to be at a weekend where there's another band, and then you don't have to be providing the music for the dancing and you can enjoy it. So if you had someone in your band who wasn't a contra dance musician and you have this dance experience, what are the kind of things that you would teach them in order for your band to have the right feel?

**Peter Siegel**

That's a really good question. I think about Joe Fitzpatrick, who's in the Gaslight Tinkers, and he is an unbelievable drummer, and he plays with the with [the O-Tones](http://theotones.com/), which is Ann Percival's swing band. He's played for a couple of other bands now that he's gotten his chops up with us. He was a rock and roll drummer, basically, and getting him to understand what it means to play drums for contra dance was sort of getting him to tune into some real subtle, rhythmic... I think of Joe, our drummer and he is also very attuned to what is going on in front of him anyway, I mean, drummers often have a natural sense of what's going on in front of them, because they're sitting in back of the whole band. My experience with drummers is often that they're like the uncle of the band, they're telling you when you put your instrument down on the floor and shouldn't step on it, stuff like that. But that said, he was a rock and roll drummer and the first thing was really tuning him into the idea that the fiddle tune is really driving the whole dance in that you really have to sort of lay the foundation behind the fiddle tune and you can reach an apex where the drums are over the fiddle, but really everything sort of swirls around whatever that fiddle tune is doing, be it on the fiddle, or on the mandolin or whatever. And the other thing is to keep the tempo super straight, to really pay attention to the dancers the entire time and really work on creating a dynamic and an arc from the beginning of the dance to the end of the dance that tells a story in five minutes. And I think that's really it. I mean, I think it's really just using your eyes and ears and you know, in our band, like when I'm working with our band we all fill different spaces. Garrett's the bottom, we've got the drums and we got me on guitar and then there's the fiddle. The wonderful thing about this band is how we're really able to just sort of look at the dancers and hear the music and really be able to hear kind of what I was talking about with the Greenfield Dance Band earlier where this space needs to be filled for the dancers. Because they really need this kind of bottom right now. So Garrett just naturally knows to play bass in a certain place now. And I know when he's when he's hanging on the bass to do something different on the guitar, so we're really focusing on each other. When I teach every year dance musicians week for a week, it's basically all contra dance band workshop all the time for a whole week. Eight hours a day with 30 people.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, 30 people!

**Peter Siegel**

So it's me and Sue Songer, and Betsy Branch and David and now Andy Davis. I'm teaching on guitar and mandolin and banjo, what I'm teaching is just that filling the space but also being all the space if there's no other instrument. So if you're playing guitar and you're playing guitar alone with the fiddle, you're basically being the piano and the bass. So you're doing a really big boom-chuck, boom-chuck, boom-chuck so that the dancers really feel that. If you have a bass player, then you have the freedom to experiment in other realms, the bass is really holding things down and so we practice that and if you have a bass player and a drummer, then you really have a lot of latitude to do a lot, because the drums could be just going [makes steady fast rhythm sounds] and keeping that sort of freight train kind of sound that you're going to get from guitar and bass and if the drums are going [makes the same steady fast rhythm sounds] the bass could go [makes syncopated rhythm sounds that contrast with the steady sounds] and the guitar can go [sings other syncopated rhythms] and the drums are really laying the foundation. And then on the other hand, if I am just on the guitar doing a straight boom chuck, the drums can be going, boom, boom, boom, boom and I can pick up boom chuck, boom chuck, boom, chuck, boom chuck. So it really comes down to being open to listening to what's going on around you and understanding what the dancers need. And so that's what I often teach when I teach new musicians.

**Julie Vallimont**

And what is your list of the things that you think dancers need? Like, you're kind of saying it without saying it.

**Peter Siegel**

They need consistency. They need to be able to really to hear the pulse, no matter what and they need to feel something. But I think so okay, so that said, some of those things are provided by the dancers themselves. If you have an experienced dance in Greenfield or you have just a basic Saturday night dance in Greenfield with a whole bunch of really fantastic dancers who know what they're doing, you could do almost nothing and the dance will just carry on. And so as a band member, to be able to tune into less is more is really important because the dancers are doing their own thing and they're gonna love the fact that they're carrying it. And the most wonderful moments are the moments where you hand the baton to the dancers and you let them sing along, or you let them you know, do funny funky things with their feet or they're balancing on the beat so hard that they're just all feeling it together. So you have to really allow for those moments.

**Julie Vallimont**

Bands have to remember that dancers love to sing along to things, you know, like Great Bear would have these licks and riffs that everyone would sing along to. But there's also like tunes like "Hommage à Edmond Parizeau," that everyone would sing [sings the B part for "Dédicado à Jos"] but of course, that's a Mexican folk melody brought into a Québécois modern tune that we have now brought to New England. [[Here is a La Bottine Souriante track with both of these tunes](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpqpbXDZ66k).]

**Peter Siegel**

Talk about tradition.

**Julie Vallimont**

And now we've done it for long enough and it's in The Portland Collection. So now it's a traditional tune in our contra repertoire. So there you go. But it's catchy and it's fun.

**Peter Siegel**

Yeah, it's funny with Dédicado à Jos, I mean, those moments with Dédicado à Jos

**Julie Vallimont**

I was singing the wrong tune, thank you.

**Peter Siegel**

No, that was right. Didn't you say that?

**Julie Vallimont**

I said "Hommage à Edmond Parizeau." But I meant "Dédicado à Jos."

**Peter Siegel**

It's funny I heard it that way anyway, but "Dédicado à Jos... but "Hommage à Edmond Parizeau" is [sings the B part for "Hommage à Edmond Parizeau"].

**Julie Vallimont**

That's another good one! [sings along]

**Peter Siegel**

It's those moments, especially with the Québécois tunes where I just think I'm in, like, the Muppet Movie, my whole aesthetic is Jim Henson and the Muppets anyway, so if I can be singing along tunes are [sings the B part for "Hommage à Edmond Parizeau" with a Muppet voice]...that's golden.

**Julie Vallimont**

You sounded like Animal when you did that.

**Peter Siegel**

Oh I could sound like Kermit too [sings the same tune sounding like Kermit the Frog], Piggy, I can do any of the Muppets. That's my other... that's my natural skill that no one knows about.

**Julie Vallimont**

Let's give us a little Piggy.

**Peter Siegel**

[In Kermit voice] Piggy? [Make's Miss Piggy's karate chop Hi-ya! sound] [Back in Kermit voice] Piggy.

**Julie Vallimont**

This is a niche market you have of doing Muppet impressions of classic New England contra to...

**Peter Siegel**

[In Kermit voice] Balance your partner. Swing your neighbor. [In Piggy voice] Hit your partner!

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughing throughout] Kermie!

**Peter Siegel**

[In Piggy voice] Kermie! [In Animal voice] More drums, more drums!

**Julie Vallimont**

[Still laughing] I'm speechless. [Laughs more] OK, I'm just gonna laugh for five more minutes. Go get a cup of coffee and come back in five minutes. Like, you know... it's so good to not take it so seriously, right? Like...

**Peter Siegel**

That's all... that's it. That's it, we just we could end right here. Yeah, basically don't take anything too seriously. I know it's one way because he's done by someone else. It's Jim Henson, and I can do any Jim Henson or what's his name? You know, um, Frank Oz. Right? Gonzo kinda like this right? Sort of like, he doesn't have the... so we've got like, Kermit and Ernie and Bert, I can do really well, because they're all they're all... not Bert, but Ernie would be Jim Henson. Yeah. [In Ernie voice] Oh, buddy Bert! Want to go to a contra dance, Bert? I hear there's a gender free contra dance we can go to! [In Bert voice] Ernie!

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughing] And now I'm getting Sesame Street and the Muppets all mixed up because it's all the same.

**Peter Siegel**

It is. It's Jim Henson. It's the magic of Jim Henson.

**Julie Vallimont**

So how about the two guys from the balcony? I know some contra curmudgeons who sound like that.

**Peter Siegel**

Oh, yes. Right. I don't know if I could do them that well.

**Julie Vallimont**

"That was too fast!"

**Peter Siegel**

Well, so you know, it's funny, I'm glad you brought that up because that is the most wonderful and annoying thing about contra dances, you know? I'll be playing a club and you know the last really big gig the Gaslight Tinkers did, one of the the last ones we did was in a club in Montreal and it was like, wall to wall freaking people. You know, 200 people just bouncing. You know, just incredible freakin'... I mean, I've never, it was just incredible. And it was Montreal, and Montreal is wonderful. Do you think anyone came up to us and told us, like, you can't hear this? Or you can't hear that? Or you're too loud? Or you're too soft? No one person said a thing. You go to a contra dance. And, you know, five people coming up at this stage, "you know, you really need to turn up the fiddle. Oh, that bass is too loud" and I appreciate that. And the thing that I've come to learn about that, the thing that used to annoy me a lot when I was younger is that contra dancers are, yes, it's a community, and yes, they're an audience in a sense, but really they're clients. They're people who are coming for an experience. And they have this expectation of their experience and they want their experience to be wonderful and we try to make it as wonderful as possible. But part of that process is adjusting things so that it's like giving them a massage, you know. Is your pillow okay? Is your head, you know, is the bass too loud? Is your experience okay? I used to jokingly say that contra dancers are sort of like kindergarteners, because they'll often tell you when they don't like something but they don't often tell you when they love you. They have other ways of telling you they love you. They're very generous people and there are people that do but honestly, like 90% of the comments are what you could be doing differently. It's all done in love because they want the whole experience to be great for them too and great for us great for everyone. [In a Muppet voice] The drums are too loud! Oh, it's funny.

**Julie Vallimont**

[Still laughing] I'm ruining our interview because I can't stop laughing! But it's good to not lose sight of the fact that the people who are calling and playing music for you are part of the community. They want the same things you do. They're not getting paid a lot. You know, they're not there to fluff your pillow, so to speak. The organizers sitting at the front door, they're volunteers, they have day jobs and a million other things to do. And we all try our best to have a good time together and if you're not having a good time, that's important and we should think about it as a community, especially if you don't feel safe. It's important to tell the organizers and have as a community as safety but it's also not about pleasing everyone. It's literally impossible.

**Peter Siegel**

It is literally impossible.

**Julie Vallimont**

As a new contra musician I tried so hard to just, I wanted to do it... not right, but well. I want to play to each community as they would want and sound traditional enough and do all these things. And in the same dance, you'd have somebody who come up to the stage would be like, that dance was the perfect tempo, thank you so much. And then someone else goes up, that was way too slow. You know, you literally can't, it's impossible. We just try to have fun and I try to do a variety of tempos in the night and some sets that are more traditional and some sets that are less traditional. That's my approach. Other bands are like, well, this is an experience, we're going to do it full on. So the people who really want this can come and have a good time all night and the people, so they won't be saying, well it was all really great except that one set that was too slow. But then, if they don't want to do that, they'll just go to something else.

**Peter Siegel**

 I think that the bottom line is that the musicians are having the best time.

**Julie Vallimont**

There have been so many times on stage, when I've been really grateful to be a musician and not a caller.

**Peter Siegel**

Yeah, oh my gosh.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because there's times when the caller calls the dance and like in the middle of the dance, a dancer will somehow get out of line and come up and tell them everything that's wrong with the choice they just made or in that quick second of turnaround time between the end of one dance and start of a next when you're trying to talk to the band and have them pick tunes that will work for your next dance. You're trying to line up the dancers and you got somebody running up to the stage going [makes some noises]

**Peter Siegel**

Or two people at the same time, I 've seen that before, just people coming [makes some noises]

**Julie Vallimont**

And then the caller's like, okay, I hear you and then they turn around to the mic as cheerful as if nothing had happened. I have respect for that. I'm glad I don't have to talk to people.

**Peter Siegel**

Oh, yeah, Nils [Fredland] is so good at that. He's so good at just being there listening.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's the kind of professionalism that we expect from our callers and musicians now. If you're calling in a hall of your friends, you can be like, I don't care what you guys think, you know, I can jokingly be like, well, we'll do one for you later. But in a big room full of people you don't know everyone and anyway, it's funny. We have to try new things so we have to let each other mess up.

**Peter Siegel**

We do. We definitely do. Well, you don't grow unless you mess up.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Peter Siegel**

You gotta make mistakes and you've got to experiment and it's the most important thing, it really is. What David used to say, if you're having half as much fun as us, we're having twice as much fun as you.

**Julie Vallimont**

[Laughs more]

**Peter Siegel**

I'm getting you going today! If I was to say one last thing right now, I would say that it has been a gift to be able to play for dancing throughout my life. It has provided me with incredible ability to develop my skill and repertoire and get to know people and be part of a community and be supported in so many different ways. If nothing else, even financially and through the pandemic, the most generous community of people that have provided for me have been the contra dancers and the people who book events who have actually really gone out of their way to give us opportunities and people in California, people in North Carolina, I just am floored by the generosity of the community.

**Julie Vallimont**

 I'm right there with you, it's been wonderful. Well, thank you, Peter, this has been fun and thought provoking and everything in between.

**Peter Siegel**

And very funny too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thank you so much.

**Peter Siegel**

 Thank you, Julie.

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