Contra Pulse Episode 16 – Audrey Knuth

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This week we talk with Fiddler Audrey Knuth. You know Audrey is performing if the room is buzzing with energy. Her fiddling has been featured in bands including The Free Raisins, The Gaslight Tinkers, Audacious (with Larry Unger), and Wake Up Robin, and she has electrified dance and concert halls across the US and Europe. Hailing from Honolulu and now living in California, she cut her folk teeth in the Boston area, attending Berklee College of Music where she studied sound engineering, and she spent years exploring the thriving New England folk scene. Audrey’s fiddle playing is rhythmically lively and spontaneous and irresistibly danceable. She’s also been on staff at various camps including CDSS English week at Pinewoods, Ashokan Northern Week, BACDS American week, and Halsway Manor in England .Audrey and I had a lot of fun reminiscing about our various Contra adventures together and our shared roots in the Boston scene. And we talked about her transition from classical violin to fiddle, her priorities as a dance Fiddler, her inspirations, and a lot more. Obviously, since she’s on the other side of the country, we talked over zoom and recorded our conversation. Hope you enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well hello, Audrey Knuth. Welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Audrey Knuth**

Hi, Julie. It's so nice to be here.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm so happy to have you here. And by here, I mean there. Because you are in California and I am in Vermont.

**Audrey Knuth**

True story.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, this is our first ever, like, Zoom phone call over the internet podcast episode.

**Audrey Knuth**

Well, I feel very honored to be the first one.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, we'll see what goes wrong. It's gonna be great.

**Audrey Knuth**

I apologize in advance to all of you listeners.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I've been giving people a weather report because we've been doing all these interviews on my porch, but it's actually raining right now. And so we'll see if the rain gets hard enough, if you can hear a little drips of rain in my background audio or not.

**Audrey Knuth**

Oh, wow. Well, I can give you the weather report here in San Diego. The high was 92 with a humidity of 50%. And it was very nice today.

**Julie Vallimont**

I want to be there.

**Audrey Knuth**

It's kind of perfect.

**Julie Vallimont**

Also, you guys have really good sushi.

**Audrey Knuth**

Oh my gosh, oh, I don't want to go off on a sushi tangent. But we have discovered delivery and takeout sushi from the places that have opened up downtown and it's incredible.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's amazing. I mean, that is one of the fun things about being a dance musician when you travel a lot is like going to different places and seeking out new restaurants. And, you know, we always got our sushi fix on the West Coast.

**Audrey Knuth**

I also discovered that I have an addiction to breakfast burritos, and I never had a real breakfast burrito until I was here in San Diego.

**Julie Vallimont**

I really want to ask you what you think makes a good breakfast burrito, but it's gonna full on turn this into a cooking podcast.

**Audrey Knuth**

it's a whole separate food category. I'll just leave it like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

What is in it?

**Audrey Knuth**

Secret San Diego sauce. I have no idea. That we're 10 miles away from the Mexican border, I think that's the secret.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's the secret. Well, let's talk about not burritos or sushi. But let's talk about something we know and love: contra dancing. And of course, you and I have known each other for years. And back when you moved to Boston I think is when I met you years and years ago when you were a Berklee student. But wait, you were at Berklee, right?

**Audrey Knuth**

I was, yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Okay, great. But let's go even farther back into time,

**Audrey Knuth**

The way back machine.

**Julie Vallimont**

Let's go back to your early days as a fiddler... and how did you get started playing for contra dances?

**Audrey Knuth**

Oh, gosh, that's a that's a good question. I was very lucky in that I got to grow up in Hawaii of all places, and one might ask, how did you get into contra dance in Hawaii? In middle school, discovered Irish dancing. There was a kind of a local school from a military family who started it. And I was playing for the dances on St. Patrick's Day at the [Hale Koa Hotel](https://www.halekoa.com/) on St. Patrick's Day, like you do in Hawaii. And I had a couple musicians approach me and they were like, have you heard of contra dance before? And I had no idea. And little did I know that that conversation would kind of change my entire life. And got into playing and dancing at the [local Honolulu contra dance](https://contradancehi.weebly.com/) first and third Saturdays at the Atherton on the UH campus and kind of fell in love with it there. And then when I moved to Boston to go to school, rumors had it that there were contra dancers that might be my age, maybe. I got taken to the Scout House, the Thursday Scout House and my first contra dance experience in Boston was with Nils Fredland calling and [Crowfoot](https://www.crowfootmusic.com/) playing. There was no looking back after that, that was the beginning of the end for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's magic. You know, I was at a dance with Crowfoot when I decided to become a contra musician also, they lured many of us into this.

**Audrey Knuth**

Well, I had no idea.

**Julie Vallimont**

I wonder if we were at the same dance?

**Audrey Knuth**

Quite possibly. This was I mean, this is going on now 10 years ago, 12 years ago. I moved into Boston in 2008.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, so it was a few years earlier for me so not the same Crowfoot dance but the same magic.

**Audrey Knuth**

I bet they were playing the same tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

They probably were. And so when you get inspired by this in Boston, how did you find your way into the contra scene in Boston?

**Audrey Knuth**

Well, you're kind of partially to blame, I hate to say it, or happy to say it. As a college student you kind of get sucked into college world. My goal in life was to become a sound engineer, actually and you know, fiddling was going to be a side fun thing. But someone told me about the MIT contra dance, and that it was sit-in friendly. I don't know how I convinced myself to go without knowing anybody. That's very unlike me. But I guess I like went and I remember playing with you and Peter [Buchak] on accordion. And I remember we had an awesome time playing and you guys were so nice to me. And I remember asking, I was like, oh, what do you do for a living Julie? And you're like, well, I work part time at a museum, but I mostly l play for contra dances. And I was like, what? You can make a living playing for contra dances? There are dance weekends, like people pay money and dance all weekend? I had no concept of that whatsoever. And then Jeff Kaufman found me at the MIT dance. And it was all downhill from there. This was not part of my life plan in any shape, or form. And here I am now talking to you on a contra dance podcast. Wow.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's so funny. Those little serendipitous things. I actually discovered the MIT contra dance much like you did, where someone told me that there was one and it was sit-in friendly. And Peter Buchak, I was a friend of his and Dan Solomon. Like we met going to the Thursday dance, which was first at the [Cambridge, MA] VFW and then Springstep [Medford, MA]. And then [Scout House](http://concordscouthouse.org/), like the same dance as you. And then I just found that Peter was running the MIT contra and he made it so friendly. He wasn't running it, but some nights he would lead the band. Other nights Victor Troll, I remember, would play piano for the band. And I didn't know any tunes yet. Audrey, I didn't know how to play contra piano yet. I sat in on pennywhistle. And Peter was still friends with me afterwards.

**Audrey Knuth**

You're blowing my mind.

**Julie Vallimont**

I am a terrible pennywhistle player.

**Audrey Knuth**

You'll have to play for me sometime.

**Julie Vallimont**

But I wanted an instrument where I could learn the tunes. So first I played pennywhistle, then I played melodica. Finally, I got an accordion. So talk about downhill.

**Audrey Knuth**

I think it was a massive upgrade.

**Julie Vallimont**

And I remember meeting you there. That was when Peter and I had the Banana Band [[La Banane Enchantée](https://web.archive.org/web/20150928094813/http:/labananeenchantee.com/)]. And those were really fun days, that dance was so welcoming to new people and so friendly, very supportive.

**Audrey Knuth**

Had it not been I would have showed up once and that would be the end of it. And again, feeling extremely welcome and being invited back to play. At that time, like... I grew up playing classical music. And even when I was playing in the contra dance band in Hawaii, I refused to take the sheet music away. I was very much paper trained. And like, I remember panicking, like... I don't know this tune and it's not in the tune book, ahhhh, and then being like, oh, maybe I could try to like play this without looking at music. What a concept. And that was a really big struggle for me, actually. And it really took actually a few years of playing contra dances every weekend ,or just sit-in friendly things of being forced to not look at the music was also a big game-changer for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Were there any particular tricks that you used to learn how to play tunes or was it just time and...

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah, I wish there was a magic button where I was like, I'm not gonna read sheet music anymore. The secret was [the Free Raisins](https://www.freeraisins.com/) lugging our sound gear to every contra dance in a 100-mile radius every single weekend playing the Medway dance, [the Concord, New Hampshire dance](https://concordnhcontra.wordpress.com/), Northampton, Worcester, all of these smaller dances, and we had a repertoire of, I don't know, 20 tunes or something like that. And like... playing them over and over again, being like, oh, wait, maybe I don't need the music. I think I think Jeff and Amy [Engelsberg] also encouraged me, like, you know you've been playing this tune for a while you know, you don't actually need the music. And then if you play a wrong note, they're not going to notice. Or like, we trust you to figure out what to do if you miss one note. And same thing to go with, like, my particular fiddle style, we recorded our very first dance, which was at Springstep. And it's I mean, I won't say it's laughable right now, but I sounded nothing like I sound right now. And I didn't do anything specifically to work on my fiddle style, like, I want to sound like X, Y, and Z. It was really just playing constantly, every weekend in front of an audience and wanting to be different or like wanting to do my best. And so it was just these little baby steps of increments of what happens if I, like, don't play the melody at all one time through. Like, what happens if I don't play? Ah, just like, these very baby steps that led me to that, but definitely no magic button.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, time and repetition, they're a good way to learn.

**Audrey Knuth**

Oh, my gosh. The other thing I was gonna say, that I forgot to mention is that I have so much to thank Amy and Jeff for. But after we recorded every single contra dance that we did, and because we were doing a lot of driving, [we had the opportunity to listen to ourselves on the drive home late at night](https://www.jefftk.com/p/record-your-playing). And so like, going down to the Cape, and it's an hour and a half drive home, we would listen to ourselves back to I don't know, to keep us awake. And it was really enlightening, one: not listening, like... I wouldn't have listened to us back by myself. It would have been too discouraging. I think of just when you're playing or when you're listening back to yourself, all you can hear are your mistakes, right? And how like, Oh my gosh, what was I thinking? But having supportive bandmates like Jeff and Amy, we would listen back together. And they would give positive feedback. Like, oh, I really liked that thing that you did. And that was something that I didn't even notice that I was playing. And by hearing them say that I was like, oh, maybe I'll try that again. And of course, we heard what we were doing wrong as well. But it was all within positivity and oooh, that's something that didn't quite work but I see what you were trying to do, next time let's try it a different way. Or let's just try try to work on that idea. And just having again, those positive bandmates was a really big, big deal and kind of like, boosted my confidence in playing. And I think got better because I was hearing... they were telling me things that they liked in my playing. And for context, this is Jeff Kaufman and Amy Englesberg in your band, the Free Raisins and we'll link to that in the podcast notes. I remember when the three of you were starting a band because I knew Amy as another kind of new piano player. And I knew Jeff just because everybody knows Jeff. So somebody told me, Jeff and Amy and Audrey are starting a band. And I was like, yeah, cool. I think people knew we were starting a band before I knew that we were starting a band, by the way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Probably Jeff wrote about it in his blog or something is how you found out.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah, he was like, "hey, Amy, Audrey, do you want to get together and just, like, play a couple of tunes?" And I was like, sure that sounds great. And by the end of the rehearsal Jeff had already emailed and got a gig booked for like, the next month. Seriously, I have so much to thank him for, I would have never done that. I would think we would have played like once, that would have been the end of it.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's interesting, those little... people with initiative who come up in our lives and kind of push things. You and I actually had very similar starts, like so much is in common. I started playing at [the MIT contra dance](http://web.mit.edu/fdc/contra/) also. My first contra band formed there. And then when [Nor'easter](https://noreasterdanceband.bandcamp.com/releases) formed... Max [Newman] and Cedar [Stanistreet] and I also all met at the MIT contra dance. I still couldn't play tunes from ear when that band started. I had an Excel spreadsheet with all the chords written in it for all the tunes and each cell of the spreadsheet was like a measure or something, kind of like the way you write up chord charts. It's mortifying now to think that I ever did that. But you have to start somewhere. You know? And then I put on a bunch of recordings of different bands and I just listened to them constantly back when iPods were a thing and I put them on my iPod.

**Audrey Knuth**

The sound of the [iPod control] wheels, brrrrrrrr, so satisfying.

**Julie Vallimont**

That little thing, that sound... and I would like, at the gym, on the bus, washing the dishes, at my office, I just listened to tunes in the background of my head until my subconscious started hearing the different patterns. Eventually I could then start to hear the differences between, like, different genres and styles of tunes like French Canadian versus old time or whatever, just as you probably did and incorporate all that somehow subconsciously into your fiddle playing.

**Audrey Knuth**

Having played for the local contra dance in Hawaii, I had some concept of it. But being a melody player, you know, that was something that I already had kind of ingrained. I can't imagine, like, having no concept of tunes. Oh, my gosh, I can't believe that, Julie, you're blowing my mind.

**Julie Vallimont**

I didn't know the difference between a jig and a reel at first; they had to teach me. This interview is not about me, but I think it's fun to draw parallels between my experience and yours just because maybe it'll help inspire new musicians who could start just as badly as both of us. I had been a classical musician, and I was a church organist for many years. And starting at like, age 14, I played organ for my local church. And so for me, contra dance is like, oh, look, there's a bunch of people, and I have to entertain them and I have to multitask. I have those skills. But I didn't know any of the music. So it's been really fun to learn. But this is not about me, this is about you.

**Audrey Knuth**

The other thing that I want to mention that I think helped was that because I didn't really understand the contra dance world and what it looked like, I had like, zero pressure on myself. I don't know if this is inspiring at all but I had no goals. It wasn't like, we're gonna be the best contra dance band in the world, we're gonna take over the planet and make money. It was something that we had a lot of fun doing. And it's fun, like, learning and becoming better. But we didn't put pressure on ourselves to do dance weekends. And I think that organic process really helped. Because I think if I did put that pressure, or if I knew how good you had to be in order to like be a real contra dance weekened band, I think I would have stopped. I would have gotten overwhelmed.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think at its best, contra dance music is a labor of love.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, and you do it because you love it. And you can get good at it through practice and repetition. But you should also enjoy that process, enjoy the process of listening back to recordings and tightening arrangements and learning how to play tightly together. Like, I love that process.

**Audrey Knuth**

Absolutely, absolutely. It's interesting, I feel that process becomes magnified when you're recording or you're making CDs is that playing contra dances for, you know, week in and week out, definitely you get better. But then when you're all of a sudden, like, oh, I have to make a CD, you take that and you condense it, you have that time to condense when you start really getting creative with arrangements and stuff. So a lot of the arrangements that the Free Raisins do and Wake Up Robin, what we do live, like really, a lot of it happened when we were sitting down in the studio or thinking about what we were going to do to record.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was just talking with somebody else about that. A lot of arrangements at contra dances just sort of happen on the fly, if there are arrangements at all. You make up something and maybe the band follows you in it. And so then you can condense some of those ideas for a CD, that's one possibility, but another one is that the stuff you think of in the studio, then you can start trying out on the dance floor.

**Audrey Knuth**

And sometimes it doesn't work on the dance floor... there's no guarantee by the way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Nor should it have to, they're kind of different animals. Yeah, for most contra bands their album is a slightly different feel. There's a few live recordings, but not a lot.

**Audrey Knuth**

I have to say the [Buddy System](https://buddysystemband.com/) record is probably my most listened to contra dance CD. I absolutely love it. It helped that I had it in my car, it was the only CD I had my car for a while and now you know Emily Rush has done the Zoom workouts, [those contra dance Zoom workouts](https://www.rushfestcontra.com/copy-of-lower-body), this is not a plug for it, I promise, but it's really fun. And we will exercise to Buddy System.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's great, it makes me happy. You should check out the Zoom workouts. I mean we're in COVID times right now and people have to find camaraderie and stay healthy, they're really fun. Emily puts video to it and contra dance soundtracks and stay in shape. We'll put that link in the podcast as well. Well, with the Free Raisins, you eventually started playing dance weekends all over the country. And then you went to record your first album. Well, I keep saying first, it's your album. Andrew VanNorstrand was your producer, which kind of started this organic process that eventually ended up forming [Wake Up Robin](https://www.wakeuprobin.com/). Can you talk about that a little bit?

**Audrey Knuth**

Sure. I'd love to. We — the Free Raisins, our first dance weekend was [Catapult](http://www.catapultshowcase.com/). It was the first one, that I think we got booked for. If folks who don't know what Catapult was, it was basically six up-and-coming bands and six callers and you play for the weekend. Oh, yeah. Julie, you guys did it as well with La Banane Enchantée and that was a lot of fun, also very nervewracking actually. It's unlike any contra dance weekend where... I don't know. And it was really awesome that we got that opportunity, that that dance weekend existed and allowed bands that otherwise wouldn't have gotten known. And so that really helped. And we toured in [Syracuse](https://syracusecountrydancers.org/), and I think that's where Andrew first heard the Free Raisins and booked us for [Great Bear Groove](https://web.archive.org/web/20190127185400/https:/greatbeargroove.com/). So those two dance weekends that year, I can't remember which year it was, maybe 2013, was kind of a big year for us in that we started playing dance weekends. We met Andrew through there, and Noah [VanNorstrand] of course, and Andrew produced the Free Raisins record. There was one summer when Jeff — Lily, his first daughter was born. And Amy and I still wanted to go on a tour and so we asked Andrew to come along with us. That was kind of the beginning of Wake Up Robin, originally called Triple A, but turns out that's very confusing and a very dumb name.

**Julie Vallimont**

Once you add Noah to it, then it's NAAA, "naaaaaaaa," so funny.

**Audrey Knuth**

Coming up with a band name, by the way, is like, more stressful than anything. I'm just putting it out there, that it's more stressful than picking tunes or whatever. I'm quite happy with Wake Up Robin. Andrew obviously loves birds and so it had to be a bird name. And [Sarah, his wife](https://sarahcallsdances.com/), her favorite flower is the wake robin, the trillium flower. Wake Robin happens unfortunately to be a name of lots of funeral homes. So we didn't want to be Wake Robin. So we settled for Wake Up Robin.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a fun story, also, Nightingale was already taken.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah, exactly. Shucks!

**Julie Vallimont**

And so that band is you and Amy and Andrew and Noah together.

**Audrey Knuth**

And, I also for the record, I do not want to leave out [the Gaslight Tinkers](http://www.thegaslighttinkers.com/) because I have never [had so much fun on stage and rocking out so hard](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0ICzWnQmn8) than playing with the Gaslight Tinkers, and feel so honored that I got to play fiddle with those guys for a few years and really miss them and miss hanging out with them.

**Julie Vallimont**

They seem like a really fun group of people.

**Audrey Knuth**

So much fun. I'm sure you'll put the link up to them. But the band, when I was in it was with Garrett Sawyer on bass, who is the sound engineer for [Northfire](http://www.northfirerecording.com/) where a lot of contra dance records have been recorded, [Peter Siegel, who you've interviewed for this](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-15-peter-siegel/), and then Jopey [Fitzpatrick], the drummer, who is just so much fun and rock solid and can play any drum beat you ask him to and so much fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a great combination of people. So you played with Gaslight Tinkers for a while before you moved out to the West Coast. Wow, fun times.

**Audrey Knuth**

I can't forget Larry Unger either. Hi, Larry.

**Julie Vallimont**

Larry will also be on this podcast. You [played with Larry](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWs9Jpbdzjg), did a lot of traveling with him, went to England and some other cool things.

**Audrey Knuth**

It's really interesting now that we're at home, and not traveling, it's been also kind of a time of reflection, and really thinking back on how lucky you know, both of us have been and all of the travels that we have done, and I don't know if I will continue doing as much traveling as I did before. But I feel very, very lucky for the contra dance community for letting me live this lifestyle for so many years.

**Julie Vallimont**

Me too, absolutely. It's a wonderful world of people out there and meeting so many people who are like-minded and like to have fun. And it's just been... and the travel and the sushi! I think contra musicians, we combine with each other in these little clumps and some of them are like, official bands and some of them are unofficial bands, and some of them are just temporary clumps.

**Audrey Knuth**

I like being in a temporary clump with you, Julie.

**Julie Vallimont**

We've had some great temporary clumps. There is the summer at Ashokan when we led the English band. That was really fun. And then we were in France and England together because Buddy System was out there, and you traveled around with us. And we had that week in Brittany where remember, we bought all the cheese in the market and put it in the glove compartment of our rental car.

**Audrey Knuth**

What's that smell?

**Julie Vallimont**

It smelled amazing. And then we would drive to the ocean or some beautiful city and put all the cheese on the dashboard and have a picnic in the car.

**Audrey Knuth**

I was actually just looking at those pictures today. I taught in my tunes class on Monday. Well, [Reign of Love](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64MN0Qx61Qg), but I use it as an excuse to kind of go through Breton music and use that as a segue into talking about that music. And so I was looking through pictures, to send a picture in the newsletter, and I found a picture of you, me and Noah in the car with all the cheeses and I'm in the back chugging this huge bottle of cider.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hard cider.

**Audrey Knuth**

Hard cider, by the way. And I was like, well, maybe I shouldn't send that picture out to hundreds of people, but here I am talking about it on a podcast. But the picture just exemplifies how much fun we had... and like, so much food that we had. It's such a beautiful part of the world.

**Julie Vallimont**

And getting to meet all the London folks, and you knowing the London folks, like you were all friends with them. Getting to meet them through you was really fun. Such a great trip. Reign of Love is a tune in the Breton style, I guess you'd say, I think it's a Keith Murphy tune [It is a Keith Murphy tune]. It's just another example of all the different ways that contra dance music has been influenced by tunes from England and France in addition to Scotland and Ireland and all these other places.

**Audrey Knuth**

Absolutely.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you travel and you get inspired by things that, you know, suit your whims, and then you bring them back and you think, hey, this might work for contra dance.

**Audrey Knuth**

And sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't.

**Julie Vallimont**

And sometimes it doesn't. Absolutely. Oh, man, there's so many things I could ask you about. I just want to talk about travel and cheese some more. We've been pent up for so long. I'd like to ask you about your fiddle style. Once you started playing for dances, do you know how your fiddling has changed, or have you had people whose styles you've emulated?

**Audrey Knuth**

This is such a good question for right now, because the answer is, I never was like, I'm gonna study study X, Y and Z, like people used to ask me oh, who's your favorite fiddle player? And I would always say Lissa Schneckenburger because [her record with Bruce Rosen, the Phantom Power record was one of the first contra dance records I ever heard](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-10-lissa-schneckenburger/) and it's one of my favorites — and still listen to it. But I sound nothing like her. So I can't give that answer anymore. Because I don't sound like her. I have never really stopped to evaluate what exactly my fiddle style is. And I think contra dance musicians, and perhaps fiddle players especially, go through these identity crises where we're not one thing or the other. I can't say I'm a trad New England player. I play for New England contra dances, but I don't play exclusively out of the New England repertoire book, right? I love old time and I play Irish and I do my very best to emulate those styles when I'm playing those styles. But I'm not one thing or the other, and being at home and doing so much more teaching than I have ever had in my entire life. I'm actually forced now for the very first time in my life to break down my fiddle style and particularly bow patterns. And I'm finding these trends that I'm doing that come across that cross over genres. And so there's a lot of, actually, Québécois bounce that I do in my bowing that I do in old time and Irish tunes, that there's just kind of bounce at the balance point. I'm making the gesture as if people can see me.

**Julie Vallimont**

To describe the gesture, Audrey's flexing her wrist as if she's holding a bow, she looks a little bit like a duckling.

**Audrey Knuth**

Quackkkkkk, quaccckkkkkk.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that the sound that Wake Up Robin makes?

**Audrey Knuth**

"Cacaaaaw!" is actually the sound that Wake Up Robin makes because you know, robins, go "cacaaawww, caaacaaaw!"

**Julie Vallimont**

That's why it's funny.

**Audrey Knuth**

But yeah, so kind of forcing myself to break down what I do with my bowing styles. And like, am I okay with this? ... and kind of slowly accepting the fact that I will never be 100% an Irish musician, I will never 100% be an old time fiddle player. I love playing those tunes and I will do what I can to emulate those styles. But like, just coming to terms and being okay with, I'm a contra dance fiddle player. My job is to play for dances. And if what I do makes people want to dance, then I am doing my job. So it's been a really interesting and sometimes frustrating road, to be honest with you, of breaking down and being like, gosh, do I really do that bowing everywhere? Okay. Maybe try starting on an up bow, I don't know. So I'm hoping that now that I'm at home that I'm you know, kind of analyzing and perhaps learn a bunch about my fiddle playing in particular. I'm not promising that I'll sound completely different when I come out of this, by the way.

**Julie Vallimont**

I hope that you don't.

**Audrey Knuth**

But I'm understanding my playing a little bit more.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, it's interesting. I feel like a lot of contra musicians don't necessarily think about or articulate where their style comes from. Because it's not a formal way that you learn it. You just kind of do it through osmosis. In fact, I think it's the best way to learn. Like, if you want to learn a good contra groove, play along with people who have a good contra groove and you internalize it and your own body will figure out what motions you need to make with your bow to make that happen.

**Audrey Knuth**

"Caaaacaawccaaw!"

**Julie Vallimont**

She's flailing her wrists around, everyone. [laughing]

**Audrey Knuth**

It works. It works. That's the secret to contra dance playing. [laughing]

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. I never knew, all these years I've been doing it wrong.

**Audrey Knuth**

Well, and I think also, going to music camps, like I can't help but think about Andrew and Noah, where they grew up going to Ashokan camp, where you — Northern Week in particular — where you are exposed to so many different genres. Québécois, Irish, old time, you know, whatever is there and whoever the teacher is, that you're going to learn a lot from that player. So I think, just... for my sake, just listening to the contra dance bands that are playing out there right now. I think just subconsciously listening to what makes that work. I'm not purposely emulating them. But I don't know, whatever I do, I guess it works.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's kind of like what goes in comes out, right? It's like the fiddle version of "you are what you eat," the people you jam with, the music you listen to, the people around you.

**Audrey Knuth**

I've gotten this question like the same questions, like, how did you get your fiddle style, blah, blah, blah. And one of the biggest things I have to say is: playing with people who are better than me. And playing with as many different people as well has been a really big factor. I honed in my foundational fiddle playing with the Free Raisins. But I think once I started playing with other people and hearing other influences as well, I think that also made a big difference in my playing. Because when you're playing with somebody, I mean, hypothetically, and ideally, you're listening to what that person is doing. And you want what you're doing to match that person. And so I think just automatically you find yourself trying to emulate what they're doing, and accompanying them or kind of... yeah... uhhhhhh......words. You know what I'm trying to say, Julie. Help me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I'm visualizing it. I was actually wondering who some of these people might have been, if you want to talk about names or anything.

**Audrey Knuth**

I'm gonna start naming people.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly.

**Audrey Knuth**

Well, of course, Andrew and Noah, playing with you, playing with Max [Newman] and actually Debby Knight is also a big, big person. If you guys don't know who Debby Knight is, she's a New England piano player who doesn't get out of Boston much but she has this amazing Cape Breton, New England, just, bounciness that I absolutely love playing with. Oh, gosh, there's so many people. Another lucky thing, I have to say is, sorry California, but New England has such a condensed amount of incredible folk musicians. And [the Monday night Concord dance](http://mondaycontras.com/) was a really cool thing. I mean, it still is, obviously. But the way that the Monday night Concord dance works is that Jack O'Connor, who runs it invites two other musicians to play with him. And you might have never played with that musician, right? And so you kind of show up and you're like, well, we'll see what happens. And so I got to play with people that I would never have gotten the chance to play with. Like, I first played with Owen Morrison at that dance. Glen Loper. Donal Sheets, I remember having a really fun time. Eric Eid-Reiner. It's just so cool that you just get like, randomly placed with these people, and you end up having so much fun. And you don't know what to expect, because you haven't played with these people. And so — and that's also like, a really cool place to learn new tunes as well, because Jack is kind of that the person who collects tunes from the people that come play with him. And if he likes a tune, he'll keep it and then the next week when the other musicians show up, he's like, oh, do you know this tune? And I was like, no let's play it. That's how I think a lot of tunes get spread, that way, because a bunch of people coming in on that dance and learning them through Jack O'Connor.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, all of a sudden, we all know [Turtle in the Grass](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-z56-lK-dk) [by Ari Friedman]. Jack really loves or, you know, Scottish tunes, or whatever Jack is interested in the time. It's fun. He was really into [Wing Commander Donald Mackenzie](https://youtu.be/JqNkSO7vCNw?t=189) for a while. And so we all played that tune.

**Audrey Knuth**

I'm embarrassed to say that I learned Winchell's Falls and Weedwalker from Jack.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's because these are Noah tunes, which is why it's funny, but you didn't learn them from Noah, you learned them from Jack!

**Audrey Knuth**

[laughing] And I was in Wake Up Robin when I learned those tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's hilarious. Well, Jack stays pretty hip. And you know, that's a great example of how the Boston scene evolves and changes like any scene, you know, that was the Yankee Ingenuity dance for many, many years and then the Yankee Ingenuity decided to retire. And then Jack and [Don Veino](http://veino.com/site/pages/contra-caller.php) continued that dance, and reenvisioned it as a place that's not quite sit-in friendly, but it's like one level apart from that, where it's invitation-friendly. But you could also sit in, you know, at times. And I played a lot of dances there. And I also met a lot of folks, Catherine Miller, I got to play with there for the first time and getting to play with Jack was really fun, having seen him on stage for so many years from a different angle.

**Audrey Knuth**

I actually remember I got to play with Bruce Rosen at that Monday dance. I remember being so nervous the first time I played with Bruce, because that record, Phantom Power was such a big deal for me when I was in high school. And when you're in Hawaii, you don't know any of these people. I just idolized him and his playing, and so getting a chance to play with him at the Monday night dance was extra special for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember one Monday, Mark Simos came and I played with him and I was equally terrified. Playing with Mark, you know, he's a Berklee professor and a songwriter, and also enjoys dance, but does many other things, and that was really fun. The MIT dance sadly, doesn't really exist anymore, it's nice that the Monday dance can pick up some of that, like being a playground for musicians to get to learn and meet each other and share repertoire. And there is a Boston repertoire. Another thing we should mention, if we're talking about Boston is of course [Roaring Jelly](http://roaringjelly.org/index.cgi), which you started to talk about Debby Knight, Debby Knight has led Roaring Jelly, this like, wonderful, what would you call it, a mega band?

**Audrey Knuth**

I guess so, but an organized mega band.

**Julie Vallimont**

They have rehearsals and repertoire and a lot of tunes from Quebec and New England, and you can hear them at NEFFA every year.

**Audrey Knuth**

Debby does a really good job of finding... she'll go out and find some tunes as well, and goes in and teaches the tunes by ear. I think that's another way that tunes get spread. Does the BIDA Open Band still — I mean, it doesn't happen now — but that's another thing that I think about, where musicians can meet each other at the BIDA Open Band and I remember having tons of fun when I was in Boston, playing at those things, and I would host the pre-parties at my house and really enjoyed that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you were a BIDA board member for a while.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I remember when we started BIDA, I was wanting places to play, selfishly. But as a piano player, it's really hard to sit in with people, and I was really inspired by David Kaynor's dances at the [Greenfield [Guiding Star] Grange](https://www.guidingstargrange.org/) and the culture on the stage of just people sitting backstage and playing along or just watching, being very communal. In Boston at the time, there wasn't totally a place... you could go to MIT and sit in with, like, a bunch of people and have really fun.... And you could go to the Scout House and hear really great contra music, but there wasn't anything in between at the time for players at that level.

**Audrey Knuth**

Actually, that reminds me, I think I had maybe heard of BIDA, but you are the one that contacted me about the musician mentorship program. And Larry [Unger] and Eden [MacAdam-Somer] were playing the BIDA dance and you asked if I could, like, sit in with them. And so I got to play a contra dance with Eden and Larry and that was so surreal. I remember being on stage. I'm like, is this really happening right now?

**Julie Vallimont**

[Eden MacAdam-Somer and Larry Unger... the core of the band Notorious](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEBzuG54ptA). That's what we wanted to try to do, is create these opportunities where we could play, I wanted to learn from these musicians with all this experience, and get a chance to play with them, so we did that for a while.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah, and, you may not believe this, but you know, I'm like, maybe an introvert. Like, I have introverted moments in my life. I would never have actively gone to the BIDA dance and been like, hey, can I sit in or try to see how I can get involved without knowing anybody. So again, it's just these slight shoves from people inviting me to participate that I think is really what allowed me to feel comfortable and then finagle my way into the contra dance world.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, we were all part of a scene, like we were all peers together, maybe a few years apart, but who cares, there's just so many of us who were all learning to play for dances, and there were different houses of people where all the dance musicians live together. There was a house with Jonah Sidman and Jon Cannon and Neil Pearlman and...

**Audrey Knuth**

Michael Friedman.

**Julie Vallimont**

Michael Friedman. You know, like all these great people. And then there were other houses, like I had a contra house. We would go, and I think Becca Bosworth-Clemens live there at some point, didn't she? I'm starting to blur memories.

**Audrey Knuth**

No, Amy [Engelsberg]. Amy lived with Jonah. Amy was part of a contra dance household as well. That was the house after Jonah's other house. All these offshoots. I remember Jeff used to do [these guerilla contras in Davis Square](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3Hg-cm_4Kg). We'd just yell the calls and all of us would get together and play our instruments outside and just feeling like we had our own neighborhood dance. Oh my gosh, I remember it. So the guerilla contra dance was a pop-up dance [in the middle of Davis Square](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Davis_Square). I don't remember if it was the first time I played with with Jonah and Jon Cannon, but it was the first time there was this magical experience. We were all huddled in playing and I think someone called [La Bastringue, which is a circle dance](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=41rxU2ew7Tg). And we were playing and I think someone yelled out, someone's got to play the melody. [laughing]

**Julie Vallimont**

[laughing] That sounds about right.

**Audrey Knuth**

I am forever grateful for that time in Boston. Just being in the right time, or right place at the right time and meeting so many incredible people and given... you know, opportunities that otherwise wouldn't have happened.

**Julie Vallimont**

We learned a lot informally. I remember the first time I ever played at the Scout House. I'm pretty sure it was with Nor'easter. I was just in awe of this place and stage and [I interviewed Kate Barnes a few weeks ago](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-9-kate-barnes/), and I'm sure she would think the story is totally ridiculous but I went up to the piano bench and the piano has been there for a long time and it's well maintained but it just has this legendary quality to it. You know, like back in the [Yankee Ingenuity](https://web.archive.org/web/20140901235350/http:/mysite.verizon.net/peterabarnes/bands.htm) days, they had the rearview mirror clipped to the side of the piano.

**Audrey Knuth**

I think it's still there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's still in the closet. Not everyone uses it anymore. I just remember going up to the, there's a cushion on the piano bench that someone had made and it had gotten years of use, and it had a little groove in the middle.

**Audrey Knuth**

Oh, [butt print](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSVMW3jZcg4)!

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember thinking, whose butts have been on this? And just like, in awe of this cushion on this piano bench. I'm putting my behind on this hallowed butt cushion!

**Audrey Knuth**

That's amazing. I remember being so petrified of playing that dance. I think the Free Raisins, the first time I played it was the Friday Advanced dance before we played [the Thursday night dance](https://www.neffa.org/thursday-contras/) I remember being even more nervous about it because I was like, does this mean that we made it as a band, we played the [Friday night Advanced Dance](https://challcontra.weebly.com/)? It's like these check marks you know, as a contra dance musician, is like playing at the Scout House, playing at NEFFA, playing at the Flurry. There's just these things that you feel pretty good after you do it, or you feel really good when you're doing it too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Playing the Dawn Dance.

**Audrey Knuth**

That is something that you do once. It was an incredible experience that I never have to repeat ever again.

**Julie Vallimont**

It wrecked me for like two days afterwards, but it was so worth it.

**Audrey Knuth**

Oh, absolutely.

**Julie Vallimont**

To this day one of my....... the first time we played especially, one of my 10 most memorable dance experiences ever.

**Audrey Knuth**

I'm getting goosebumps thinking about it. We had Luke calling with us, [Luke Donforth](https://www.madrobincallers.org/collectivecallers/luke/), and you know, it's that whole thing. I mean, this happens every time. But when they turn the lights, you know when they turn the lights off because the sun is rising and you're like, I have literally been playing all night.

**Julie Vallimont**

The whole hall erupts and cheers, people have this real sense of like, we made it!

**Audrey Knuth**

I'm not sure what we did. But we did it. Oh my gosh. Yeah, absolutely.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are some of your other favorite dance memories?

**Audrey Knuth**

I was afraid you'd ask me this.

**Julie Vallimont**

I know. It's hard to ask such specific questions.

**Audrey Knuth**

Like every weekend is special on its own way. Ah, I mean, it's true. When I think about it. Just recently, I guess last year goodness, Amy and I played [Camp Sturtevant](http://www.caldancecoop.org/special-events/camp-sturtevant/). Have you ever heard of that camp before?

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that the one where you have to hike into it?

**Audrey Knuth**

Yes. So Camp Sturtevant is the, well unfortunately, the building may or may not still be there. The fire, it's unclear as of right now. But it's just up Mount Wilson in Pasadena. And you show up, [put your stuff on donkeys](http://www.caldancecoop.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/IMG_6646.jpg), and the donkeys haul everything up. And you hike four miles up to this cabin. There's 30 people maximum and it's just this one room where you eat and you dance and you hang out, all in this one thing. I had gotten there late because I was at a gig and I couldn't make it in time to put my stuff in the donkey. So I was carrying my backpack and then my fiddle on my chest. Amy and Derek Engelsberg brought their son Baxter, and so they're hiking four miles up with Baxter on their back, and Dana Parkinson just there to like, cheer us on. But halfway up the hike. Dana was like, you guys, I think this is a bad time to tell you that I'm afraid of heights. But we hiked up there and I was pretty nervous. It was just Amy and I playing, the two of us, like, how are we gonna play an entire dance weekend with 30 people, how is this a dance weekend? It was just this perfect combination of community and fun tunes. Amy had this brilliant idea of printing out the table of contents of the Portland books, and then cutting up the names of the tunes into pieces of paper and putting it in a hat. So we would go around and the dances were short, so we only needed one tune sets. We would go around and asking people to take tunes out of the hat. Then we would play the tune out of the hat for better or for worse.

**Julie Vallimont**

How did those matches go?

**Audrey Knuth**

Dana was very kind as the caller and supportive of our decisions. Sometimes we would throw the tune away if it just didn't make any sense or we would save it for later. And then we would write down each tune that we played and then we would number it one through three, whether or not we liked it or not.

**Julie Vallimont**

You have data.

**Audrey Knuth**

We have data on this, exactly. That was just just the camaraderie and everyone having hiked, and then the next day you hike another four miles up to Mount Wilson. And so there's a lot of hiking involved. But it was gorgeous. And just because we're all like here, 30 people, you're kind of forced to get to know people, and people that you wouldn't have known otherwise. It's so easy at a dance weekend to just stay with the people that you're excited to see, and your friends, of course, and you want to do that. But in that kind of situation, it was really nice to get myself out of my comfort zone and meet new people and really get to know other people that I otherwise wouldn't. And so that was definitely, definitely an experience.

**Julie Vallimont**

They say that, you know, at its best, any tune goes with any dance. I think with modern choreography and the diversity of the tunes we have now, I don't think that's totally true anymore.

**Audrey Knuth**

No, no, it's part of the creative aspect of playing for contra dances that you have that liberty, the caller hands you the card and it's your artistic job to find what you think would best match the dance. And so that's like, I don't care, whatever, we'll play whatever. Like, you know, there are appropriate situations for that, like Camp Sturtevant for example. But there is a beauty in that process that I think us contra dance musicians take pride in. I was very lucky to sub for [Elixir](https://www.elixirmusic.com/) a couple of times and it was really interesting to see Anna Patton's process of picking tunes and this is very deliberate, and she'll sit down with the caller before the dance happens and pick everything out. And it's very deliberate and the work pays off.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'd be curious to talk to you about your approach as a fiddler of matching tunes to dances. You want to just talk about tunes again, would you rather we do that?

**Audrey Knuth**

No, I'm happy to talk about it. There's so many things that go into that process, into picking tunes. I'm sure maybe a bunch of people have already talked about this on your podcast. But it doesn't just depend on the dance at that time but it also depends on what you just played, where that dance is in the particular evening and genres. Yeah, there's a lot that goes into it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you look at the card when you match or do you have the caller tell you or what's your personal process?

**Audrey Knuth**

I personally prefer looking at the card. It's funny because I play in a bunch of bands, every band is a little bit different in the process, most of the time it's a group decision in that we are all pretty much on the same page when that comes to it. So for dance weekends, it's always nice to know, especially if it's the evening dance, kind of get an idea of what the caller is going to be doing. So again, meeting with them in advance, even if they don't know the very specific dances, they can give us an idea of what they're looking for. And so always looking at the card before the dance starts. Knowing where the balances are. And of course as a dance band, we have the sets that we want to play, we know what sets work and that we want to feature and so we kind of make sure that those can work into whatever the evening or the dance program, make sure we can get those in and like not play our ending set first thing at the beginning, right? Like, you may want to save it towards the end. What I do like about playing with Wake Up Robin is that we do have a certain amount of sets that we have kind of arrangement wise. But there's also a especially kind of in the morning sessions where it's a little bit more laid back and the caller is doing a specific session or whatever. This is kind of the time that we like to play around as a band because we don't live near each other. In fact, we all live in like the four opposite corners of the United States right now. And so there's no possible way that we can rehearse. Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating if we really wanted to, I guess we could.

**Julie Vallimont**

Just to tell people that's with Amy in Seattle, you in California, Andrew in Syracuse, New York and Noah in Asheville, North Carolina.

**Audrey Knuth**

Right, exactly. So we're not close. We were lucky enough that we played enough dance weekends together that we weren't rusty or anything when we got together, but we would take the morning sessions as an opportunity to perhaps expand our repertoire. I would pick a tune that I preferably knew or a tune that I was excited about and we would start off with that. And so we start out with a tune and kind of a mood. Amy and/or Andrew would lay down the groove and they would communicate musically about kind of where that groove was going and then Noah would kind of listen for a while or play along if he knew the melody or not but then kind of figure out maybe a rhythmic lick or a melodic phrase that would match the tune in a specific groove. So we have these like different layers, that would happen. So by the time, and usually this is just with one tune, that we have these multiple layers, we have four people, three of them have the opportunity to play rhythm, I guess I could play rhythm too. But we have all these different blocks, playing blocks. So you can have just rhythm or just melody or just melody and that one rhythmic lick that Noah or Andrew or whoever came up with. So you have these like three, four different things that you can play around with and either by verbalizing it or kind of making a big head nod, or you feel everyone kind of building up and someone yells something, it's just like really fun, organic experience of making up arrangements on the fly. Because we have four people in the group, it's a little bit easier to do it that way. And then having so many flexible musicians who can play both melody or rhythmic stuff, there's just so many different combinations. That was what I really looked forward to in dance weekends, actually, was that creative aspect and experimenting on the fly.

**Julie Vallimont**

Weekends are great to do that, or tours, they test you in different ways. When we were talking about being a new band, tours give you the chance to try a set multiple times on multiple days and improve it. Weekends stretch your repertoire to the end and I remember one of Nor'easter's first dance weekends, it was a smaller weekend and they want to take a chance on a new band, which we greatly appreciated, and we were the only band and we played for 18 hours of dancing in three days.

**Audrey Knuth**

I'm having flashbacks of very similar dance weekends.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a lot of tunes. We were really pulling out things that we hadn't played before, you know, but it was fun to do. It's a wonderful thing, or like playing it for [CDH, playing at Contradancers' Delight Holiday](http://www.contradancersdelight.com/), for the first time Noah and I played for that. That's a week. And everyone's all together in the same hotel place for a week and there's hours of dancing every day, hours and hours and hours every day. And there's multiple bands, but still each band is playing between two and six hours a day, something like that. A whole week of that, like you will go through your set list.

**Audrey Knuth**

You are forced to be creative.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those afternoon sessions, you're talking about those little breakout sessions, I'd be like, Noah, just make up a tune. He'd be like, okay, right. And so he'd do potatoes, he'd just start playing a tune, and I'd give him a few times to like, figure out what it might be until it starts to crystallize into a form, and then eventually I'd come in on it. And he'd yell chords to me if I didn't get them. Sometimes I got them, sometimes I didn't or hey, Noah I'm gonna play a tune that you don't know, on the piano. And that's fun to do things like that and we made up a lot of stuff.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah, for the record, I would not recommend doing this if you haven't played with your bandmates for a long time, this is something that, you know, that is extremely enjoyable because we have played for so long together that we know each other's playing. I'm not saying they're predictable, but we were so used to and accustomed to their playing that it's not this intimidating thing and so generally it doesn't crash and burn.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's true. Like, it's easy to forget that when you play with someone and if you learn their instincts and you learn the vocabulary tools, and you know how to listen and lock in with each other. You learn, like, what the glance with the eyebrows up means versus the glance where you just shake your head or you know, like...

**Audrey Knuth**

Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And like now with technology, if this groove is really awesome I'll just turn on my phone and hit the record button so that we can remember what we did. So that's kind of how we come up with new sets.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, sometimes it's all the time we have and sometimes those are the most inspired things. Like even if we try to have a rehearsal, rehearsal is a different setting, you don't get the same input from the dancers and just that raw, that thing that forces you to do it on the fly because you have to be in the moment when you're playing for dancers.

**Audrey Knuth**

And you know immediately whether or not it's working or not. If they're throwing things at you from the floor, you know, it's not working.

**Julie Vallimont**

The dance grinds to a halt.

**Audrey Knuth**

The caller gives you like the look of the devil, like maybe you should do something different.

**Julie Vallimont**

So, Audrey, I'm gonna ask you a question that I wouldn't normally ask you as, like, Julie-the-Person but as an interviewer, I'll ask you the slightly stilted question. What do you think of as your job, as a contra dance fiddler?

**Audrey Knuth**

Wow. What is my job?

**Julie Vallimont**

Like what's going through your head besides looking for fun people on the dance floor? What else is going through your head?

**Audrey Knuth**

Immature Audrey is like, well, to have fun, duuuuh.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, that is kind of the point. Like, let's not take this too seriously, right? That's literally the point. Yeah, there is no other point.

**Audrey Knuth**

That's a really good point. Luckily, my musical aesthetic happens to match what is required in a contra dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

How convenient.

**Audrey Knuth**

I wouldn't be doing it otherwise. The most obvious answer is make sure they're having fun and dancing, blah, blah, blah, and that they're having a good time. But for me... it sounds so hokey. But being myself is really important to me or not having to pretend that I'm somebody else that I'm not. I feel grateful that contra dance has accepted me for who I am, both musically and as a person. I think being genuine in playing and as a community member is crucial. And I think people notice that and so having fun and enjoying myself is part of that. And if I'm having fun playing music, I think that that comes across in the dancing. Hopefully, ideally. I yeah. You just have to be careful, because part of me enjoying it and having fun is how I feel I can be creative and share what I have with people and that is important. I think if I'm not having fun or not enjoying myself, I don't know if dancers can tell, but it's important for me at least, it's not worth it for me if I'm not enjoying it. Of course, every dance is not going to be the highlight of my life and every dance is going to be perfect. And we know that and sometimes you have off days, like that's the reality of life. Right? Like, I'm not gonna deny that. But on average, knowing that I am enjoying myself and that what I am doing is positive and having a positive impact on people, I think is my job. I hate that word.

**Julie Vallimont**

I should have said goal, but still I think that's a great answer. I think you put a lot of your heart into your playing.

**Audrey Knuth**

I have no choice. I mean, it's just like I can't do anything else.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, that's also who you are as a person, your playing has this wonderful energy to it. And there's times when, like, especially if you're playing and there's like lots of other things going on like Noah and I were talking about this in Wake Up Robin, where you probably get that a lot. where like, I was like asking what does Audrey do when like Noah and Andrew and Amy are all locked in and this really loud riff or something. And I was saying that you always find a way just to soar above everything. You come up with these fiddle lines that just soar. You have this really amazing tone, which is something you kind of in a way have in common with Lissa, you know, you have different kinds of backgrounds. But you both have this really beautiful tone, this clear tone that just sails above everything else. So when you you let it fly that's really great.

**Audrey Knuth**

I have to say there is nothing in this world like having three rhythmically in-sync people to play along with; it's like this truck that's just going full force and I get to stand on top of the truck while going wooooooo hooooo!

**Julie Vallimont**

You're the person waving from the parade float?

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah, oh, it is so amazing.

**Julie Vallimont**

And you also do that with Free Raisins, of course, but like, a good rhythm section is really an amazing thing. It liberates you to do so many things.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah, it liberates me to not play if I don't want to.

**Julie Vallimont**

It sounds like when you play, you're not thinking about the technical aspects of playing, like... you're not consciously, maybe correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like you're not consciously thinking about, is the tempo, right or not or how is my phrasing or is this matching the moves of the dance, but that you intuitively know it and you've learned it from playing dances, so you don't have to think about it or articulate it, but you still do it.

**Audrey Knuth**

I mean, if I play a really awful note, like, I will be very aware of that awful note. Oops, just changed keys by accident there. No, you're absolutely right and I think you don't have time as a contra dance musician, if you're thinking about, did I breathe in the right place? Did that note land the exact way that I want it, there's there's not time for that. And that you hope that by the mood that you're trying to convey that you're doing all of those things subconsciously. And then again, by playing so much that you have built these skills without having to be intentional about it. And that you can let the creativity and your mood reflect what you're playing. And I have to say playing a lot for — I know this is a contra dance podcast, but — playing for English dancing, that I have done a fair amount of, especially this past couple of years, has also really affected the way that I perceive music, and I think has heightened my listening skills as well, because in English, you're given the tune, so you don't have that creative aspect because ideally, the tune already matches the dance. And that it's even more crucial as an English musician to be listening to the musicians around you. There's a little bit more space in English as well to be more intentional about tone and spacing and breathing. Because not every tune is 120 BPM, right, and you have a little bit more space. And so I actually am really grateful for playing English because I do have a little bit more time being like, this is in the key of F, I'm going to be really intentional about landing that second finger just the way I want it to, or about the speed of the vibrato, or what angle my bow is going to be in. And that it's kind of a fun challenge in English to do that, and hopefully because I have the time in English to think about that aspect more that in theory, it crosses over in the contra dance world. I'm making a lot of hand gestures folks, you can't see that, and I'm not usually a hand gesture person, but it felt appropriate right now. I don't know.

**Julie Vallimont**

But yes, fiddle bowing kinds of gestures.

**Audrey Knuth**

Exactly. So hopefully, I think playing a lot of English has helped me a little bit in playing for contra dances and helped keep that technique and tone and phrasing in mind. Now I'm just making faces.

**Julie Vallimont**

I wondering like, it's funny to ask you a question about your repertoire as a fiddler, because your repertoire probably depends a lot on who you're playing with and what setting you're in.

**Audrey Knuth**

And also who I'm dating at the time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, like, are you dating an Irish tenor banjo player?

**Audrey Knuth**

Folks, I mean, it's totally true. I am either cursed or blessed with the fact that I love so many different genres of music. I think that's why contra dance music appeals to me so much is that I am attracted to all of these things. I can't just pick one and I have to blame my dad also for my initial love of music. Every Sunday evening we would have music night, as a family, when we were young, and it would always either feature a genre or an artist, a composer and we'd spend that evening kind of learning the history and doing just some deep listening. One of his favorite genres is old time, my dad plays mostly old time these days. And so I kind of got that bug as a teenager kind of playing old time but also kind of getting sucked into the Irish world as an Irish dancer. I am currently dating a wonderful human who plays the Irish pipes, and whistles and flutes. And it's been so much fun to kind of dig in a little deeper with that, being here in San Diego. Playing with a piper is unlike anything else, they are a complete orchestra with the drones and the regulators and the melody, and really listening in and doing some deep listening of pipes, which I have never done before. I've kind of noticed my playing shifting a little bit and listening to the way he plays and the way that he ornaments or ornamentates, that's not a word...ornaments.

**Julie Vallimont**

Ornaments.

**Audrey Knuth**

His ornamentation, and how he plays tunes that I've played forever, but hearing how these very specific piping things go on and really fun to emulate that a little bit. So it's been situational but I'm playing a lot more Irish these days and absolutely having a blast doing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you find that Irish tunes work well, for contra dancing?

**Audrey Knuth**

Ooh, trick question. I should have had that coming. So not just with Irish music but with like any trad music, there has to be a little bit of flexibility with it when you're playing for contra dances, specifically because of tempos and the way that the tunes phrasing matches the dance. Actually, I would make this argument with both old time and Irish that if you play it 100% strictly, or the way that you would play in a session, it's not necessarily fun for the dancers. And so there has to be a little bit of flexibility in your playing in order to work with the dancing. So like an old time, picking a 32-bar tune doesn't hurt, but picking a well-phrased 32-bar tune also doesn't hurt, and maybe changing keys every dance, maybe, I don't know. And with Irish music, if you were to try to play an Irish tune, the way that you would at session at 120 BPM all night, with all the little doohickeys and whatnot, no one's gonna notice it and it's gonna be too jumbled. Wow, this is a strong opinion, uh, these are Audrey's thoughts and these are, they're willing to change. But this is how I currently feel in the moment, that you just had to be a little bit careful when you are playing strictly trad tunes without thinking about the dancers in mind. Oh my goodness.

**Julie Vallimont**

You contra-fied them.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yes, but... you have to contra-fy them with paying respect to the genre as well.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, or else they're not satisfying; like, someone I know who... we were all really into the tune [The Road to Malvern](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUOga7kj43s) for a while, really great old time tune, really crooked.

**Audrey Knuth**

I was like, that is crooked, my dear.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, the B part is too short. It's missing a whole phrase at the end. And I have a friend who will not be named, Peter Buchak, who really wanted to play it for dances. And so we made up a new phrase to put at the end of the B part so we could play for dances. And it was kind of fun, but it takes away the magic of the tune.

**Audrey Knuth**

The magic of the tune is that it's crooked.

**Julie Vallimont**

The phrases are already just the right length for it to say what it needs to say, it was complete as it was.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah and [Red Prairie Dawn](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEBzuG54ptA) is close enough to Road to Malvern that you can play Red Prairie Dawn for contra dances instead. Like, there's so many other tunes that I would feel weird about kind of...oh, this is like, controversy territory right now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, there is one common tune in the contra repertoire, [Fleur de Mandragore](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAyrP4CBHMs), which actually is crooked in the original version. There's an extra beat right at the beginning of the B part, everybody takes it out and I love that extra beat. I kind of stopped playing it for contra dances. It's okay, we can be controversial because I'm a curmudgeon. So it's all right, Audrey.

**Audrey Knuth**

So for the record, the Free Raisins also play it crooked but we will make sure the dance... so that it's crooked at the end of the A2 going into the B1, and if there is a dance move at the top of the B1 that doesn't have a balance, or it's a very smooth like it's a hey or something. We might throw it in at the end of the tune not the entire time through. I don't know, I still go back and forth about it, honestly, I don't, it's a tricky one. And maybe I have to be in the right mood for it. I don't know. I'm making faces... you can't see my faces right now.

**Julie Vallimont**

She's making uncomfortable faces. I mean, you can play slightly crooked tunes for contra dances as long as you line the crooked part up with the dance. I haven't seen this, but someone told me that David Kaynor would do things like that when he was calling because he's also calling and fiddling and picking the tunes, he could kind of line up the parts. Someone can write to me and tell me if that's a true story or not, but it would not surprise me in the least.

**Audrey Knuth**

I just don't want the dancers to be uncomfortable. You know, if there's something weird in the tune and you're not a musician, but you feel like something's not quite right. You know, like when the tune doesn't quite line up with the dance, there's just a slight uneasiness or a little bit more brain power has to happen when that's happening. And you don't want...not you don't want the dancers to think....... but you don't want that to take away from what's happening. I guess is the most important thing,

**Julie Vallimont**

It pulls them out of their dance experience. Even things like waltzes, we were playing a waltz from Quebec, [L'ange aux patins](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CIXz9NpqyUw), it's a beautiful waltz and it's straight in terms of it has all measures of three, but it has an odd number of measures at the end of the B part.

**Audrey Knuth**

Where you end up on your left foot instead of your right foot at the top?

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. And so we didn't know any better and we're like, let's play this, it's so beautiful. And I thought, well, it's all in three. Why does it matter? But some of the dancers came up and this was a long time ago. We ended up on the wrong foot. Was that us? Are we crazy? And then I'm like well, after one more time through the waltz you'll be back on the right foot again.

**Audrey Knuth**

True confessions of Julie and Audrey.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, right. I know. This is funny. This is like, we reminisce about cheese, Boston, and our dance mistakes.

**Audrey Knuth**

Oh my gosh, and also like, trial and error but as a general rule, I would not want to play crooked tunes for a dance or try to like, make it fit the dance by changing the tune. There are just too many tunes in the world. And there are other opportunities to play those crooked tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely. They have a home somewhere else. We have good New England contra dance tunes. Let's play the ones that are really good for the dance. I find that some Irish tunes have phrasing that is good for contras and then some of them have kind of windy squirrely long phrases that aren't good, or I would only use them for some dances that have long moves like a full hey or something like that.

**Audrey Knuth**

Right, exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you have to keep all those things in mind. So it's funny that you live in California now where you've been for a while. And we've been just talking about Boston because that's what we have in common. We haven't talked about the California dance scene at all. And by the way, I just want to note to everyone who listens to this podcast, I do think it's important for us to talk about other regions of the country besides New England and I promise you we will; it's just with coronavirus, it has been easiest to do it on my porch with people who live near me.

**Audrey Knuth**

I will be the cross between the two.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, you can be our gateway. I do want to talk to people from all over the country. Don't worry, you are on my list of people to talk to. But would you like to talk at all about the West Coast scene and your experiences there?

**Audrey Knuth**

I would love to. I first moved to the Bay Area going on two or three years ago, goodness gracious, and community or being part of the local dance is important for me even though I've been traveling a lot. It just makes me feel grounded, I guess. And having been part of BIDA, I just felt natural to be involved. And so I immediately showed up as like, hey everybody, I'm here. The Bay Area has such an awesome dance scene, both contra dance and English dance, and I helped for a time with the Wednesday night dance with [Erik Hoffman](https://erikhoffman.com/). Just a really great group of folks, and felt really honored to be a part of it and played as much as I possibly could, and luckily most of the dances happen during the weekdays, so I could travel during the weekends and come back and play the local dances through there. I mean, there's so many dances there and I felt at home there, coming from Boston, and coming to the Bay Area to a pretty healthy dance community was very nice, and [playing a bunch of dances with Chris Knepper and Christopher Jacoby](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9_Hx2AsxYM), especially Christopher, you know Christopher, but we went back, way back from the East coast, and having him as a musician buddy in Oakland was very important to me. So and got an opportunity to play with Chris Knepper, Daniel Steinberg is out there as well and [Erik Hoffman](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWRZ1KZEK6c), and just great folks. I honestly played just as much English as I did contra dance over there. And just anyways, I'll... go on about how lovely everybody is. But just trust me that I felt very much at home there, and good old [Claire Takemori](https://www.facebook.com/ClaireTakemoriDanceCaller/), as well, it was really nice to form a friendship with her. When the world came crashing to a halt earlier this year, took this opportunity to spend some time in San Diego, where my partner lives, and this might look like a formal announcement to the world but this is kind of my permanent home right now. I don't know what that means for the local contra dance. I'm very lucky that Frannie [Marr] and her husband, Bill live over here and we've had some social distance hang times with her and feel really grateful that she's around here. But I'm curious about what that's gonna mean when things open up again, and looking forward to potentially getting to know the San Diego Community as well. LA is also like, the local community, even though LA is two hours away without traffic. So it's like, actually six hours away. I'm actually really curious about what's going to happen in the coming year for me music-wise, locally, I have to say the West Coast has some of the most fun dance weekends, because on the West Coast everything is so spread apart from each other that the local communities obviously exist, but I really think that the whole West Coast really comes together in the dance weekends. There's just some absolutely phenomenal dance weekends out here in California and the Pacific Northwest, and they do a really good job with those.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, dance weekends in Seattle and Portland, Oregon, like [Raindance](https://www.portlandraindance.org/), and then all up and down the California coast, like Frannie is one of the organizers of [Fiddling Frog](http://www.caldancecoop.org/special-events/fiddling-frog/). A lot of my friends, the bands who I run into at dance weekends, a lot of them are from the West Coast, like [Jeff Spero](http://www.jeffreyspero.com/), piano player, also organizer down in LA, just so many folks.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah, the Syncopaths, like [Ashley [Hoyer]](http://www.ashbroder.com/) is so much fun to play with, we had a couple of gigs lined up this year that obviously aren't happening with me, her and Jeff, and I hope to do that when things settle down.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, cool. I want to hear those.

**Audrey Knuth**

Me too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, lovely, folks.

**Audrey Knuth**

Yeah, so California is not so bad.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm glad that you found a good home, even if it is far away from us. We're adjusting to this, but there was a time when it didn't matter if we were all in different states because we would see each other, there really was this kind of weird, national meta community of people like the dancers, you see dancers at CDH in West Virginia, you see the same folks at a weekend in Florida, you see the same folks at a weekend in California.

**Audrey Knuth**

I feel like I saw you more at dance weekends, even though we lived in the same city. It's just that's where you see people. I never worried about not seeing folks because I was like, I'll just see you at the next dance weekend. And having friends all over the country was... we didn't think twice about it. And so now it's very different. I have a love-hate relationship with the internet right now. I think as everybody does. The positive side is it's allowing me to stay in communication with folks and doing these online contra dances and whatnot. I do feel connected. It's not the same, I think everyone knows that. But we're doing our best, obviously. And you're creating these podcasts and we're all trying to figure out ways of staying in the community right now. I think it's awesome that you have figured out a way to stay involved. I've been doing these contra dance things I've got, plug, [my Monday night tunes class called Tunes and Stuff](http://www.audreyknuth.com/lessons).

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, doing stuff with Audrey, this is the place to be. So what kind of tunes have you been teaching in your Tunes and Stuff, class.

**Audrey Knuth**

Everything. We're on week number 23 right now. And what I like about this class is that it's called kind of open-ended and that I pick a tune, preferably that I know. I take the first half of the class to teach it and then take the second half, the "stuff" part, to be whatever I want. So it can be talking about chords, melody, harmony, bowing, or history lessons, we were talking about Breton stuff the other day... and being able to play examples. It's really a fun kind of platform to do that. It's strange, though, I've never thought of myself as being kind of a teacher, you teach at camps and teach a tune, but it's a totally different thing. And now, it's been kind of an interesting process, again, like I was talking about earlier about, like, oh, I actually have to think about my bowing for once in my life, and really forcing myself to break down, why does this tune sound good? Why does it work for contra dances? And it's been a fun learning experience for me. I really, really enjoy doing my Monday night class. It's been very grounding for me of like, what does it mean to be a musician right now, a full time musician, and I have to do stuff in order for me to function. I have to be busy, I have to be producing stuff. And it's honestly a little overwhelming right now. Because as a musician, right now, if you want to continue being a "musician," you have to be online, you have to be on the internet, you have to have this presence. So there's like, this weird pressure. I don't know if pressure is the right word. But we have to figure out a way of continuing to be a part of the community or to make money or both right? So it's been kind of an interesting experience for me to figure that out. And what does it mean for me right now living in San Diego and still wanting to feel connected with everyone? So this Monday night class has been grounding. Yeah, having something every week that I can look forward to and work on and continue to get better at teaching, as well and doing various concerts and Zoom contra dances and what not, and doing sound has always been, it's been fun and also a learning experience that's the truth.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, there's ways that we can continue to grow and enrich our community even if we can't all be together. One of the nice things about these online classes is that people who normally...like, they might not live near a big contra dance center and now musicians from all over the country can take these classes and get to learn and practice and have something to focus on.

**Audrey Knuth**

I have a woman that comes every week to my class who lives in Hobart, Tasmania, and [runs a contra dance there](http://folktas.org/dancing/tascontra/). I'm just like, that would never ever happen, you know, otherwise.

**Julie Vallimont**

There is a contra dance there? In Tanzania, is that what you said?

**Audrey Knuth**

Tasmania.

**Julie Vallimont**

Tasmania. Okay.

**Audrey Knuth**

How did that start? Well, actually it's funny. We just had, like, a hangout time after class yesterday and kind of asked her the same question. I think she has some English friends or whatever that brought it over. But, because it's an island, and they've been kind of very isolated from the rest of the world, they're able to actually have dances again, slowly but surely that they're able to start dancing. So it was really encouraging to hear that they've started to do it again. And there's an old time community there as well.

**Julie Vallimont**

Old time community of Tasmania.

**Audrey Knuth**

Do they play with a Tasmanian accent? That's what I want to know.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's the great thing about these traditions, is that they move around and they take on a thing of their own. Like we'll talk about when we play English country dance tunes. They don't sound like the way they play them over there or when we play French tunes, they don't really sound like that either.

**Audrey Knuth**

No, no matter how much French cheese we eat. Well, you know, it was interesting, like when we were in London together and the London barn dance, that's such a trippy experience, that we're playing an American tradition and dancing an American tradition in England. And it is so much fun. But it's slightly different, not in a bad way at all. But it's slightly different.

**Julie Vallimont**

It is, the dances move differently, it's different, but it is fun.

**Audrey Knuth**

I appreciate you doing these interviews. And again, we're all of us, we're all in this together, we all have our different situations. But we're all trying to figure it out and I feel so lucky to have the contra dance and just the folk community. I feel very supported right now, like things obviously aren't easy. I'm not going to pretend that life is perfect. But I couldn't do it without the community and feeling supported. So who knows how long this is going to be? And if it's gonna get easier or not, but I feel pretty good. I feel as good as one possibly can in this situation.

**Julie Vallimont**

I also feel very grateful for this community that we have here. I'm grateful to you for sharing your time with us. It's been so much fun to talk to you Audrey.

**Audrey Knuth**

My pleasure, Julie. Thank you so much for having me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, thank you. Take care.

**Audrey Knuth**

Thank you. You too.

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