Contra Pulse Episode 18 – Andy Davis

**Julie Vallimont**

Andy Davis calls and plays accordion and piano for traditional New England style contra and square dances. Andy’s specialty is calling community events inclusive of dancers of all ages and abilities. For over thirty years Andy has taught music and dance in Vermont public schools, summer camps, weddings, parties and community gatherings.

Andy is a founding member of “New England Dancing Masters,” publishers of dance books and recordings for the teaching of New England traditional dance. For 30 years he was part of the group “Nowell Sing We Clear,” a Vermont based group that performed and recorded mid-winter carols and customs.

For many years Andy and his wife Robin were program directors for Country Dance and Song Society “Family Weeks” in West Virginia, Massachusetts and New Hampshire. They live in Brattleboro, Vermont. Their son Arthur was featured on an earlier episode of this podcast.

In this interview, Andy talks about how he got started in the Contra world and his move to Vermont, what he loves about traditional dancing and community, share some of his experiences teaching dance to children, reflects on his perspective as both a caller and a musician, reminisces about a lot of names from the past and the present, talks about how traditions can change over time, and talk about the deeper folk dance community in New England that exists beyond the Contra community.

Hope you enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hello, Andy Davis and welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Andy Davis**

Hello, Julie. It's fun to be here.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Howdy neighbor.

**Andy Davis**

It's like being on a beautiful October summer day.

**Julie Vallimont**

It is, it was gloomy and cold this morning, and then all of a sudden, the sun came out. It's 70 [degrees F], it feels like and I'm looking at Mount Wantastiquet across from my house. It is beautiful. It's orange and red. It's a little past peak [foliage], but still pretty. I'm happy that we got this beautiful weather. I interviewed Mary Lea a few days ago, and we were out in the cold rain. It was sprinkling when we started and then pouring by the time we finished.

**Andy Davis**

Well, I'm a little sad about that, because you and Mary didn't deserve that.

**Julie Vallimont**

We're hardy souls.

**Andy Davis**

I'm not sure I deserve this good weather.

**Julie Vallimont**

You have to like weather to live in New England.

**Andy Davis**

My wife and I went to Iceland recently and they have the same expression. Of course, they say it in Icelandic, which I have no hope of saying. But when we use the expression "if you don't like the weather, wait a minute." This Icelander said oh, we have that same expression, except we say wait 15 minutes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, where should we begin?

**Andy Davis**

At the very beginning.

**Julie Vallimont**

Okay, where would you like to start? You can talk about how you started playing music, how you got involved in playing contra dances. Go back to the moment of your birth, if you like.

**Andy Davis**

Well, I was always a lifelong musician, really kind of as a child and teenager wannabe. I had no great skill as a child in playing. I was just tenacious. I started taking piano lessons, I think when I was seven. And it wasn't any great shakes, it attracted nobody, absolutely nobody's attention, I don't even think my family's attention. I played in elementary school sometimes. I was so nervous that my heart was beating out of my chest, but I just kept at it, even though performing was a torture. I went all the way through high school, and I was kind of a baroque music geek, I built a harpsichord and a clavichord. I was really into early music, and Bach, but I wasn't all that good at it. I just kept plugging away at it. I went off to a college in Wisconsin that had a conservatory, and I was utterly miserable. I dropped out after one year and I came back to the DC area. My brother had an old Silvertone banjo in his closet, and my parents had given it to him because he played the classical guitar—and still does quite well—and I started learning how to play that banjo from Pete Seeger's "How to Play the Five-String Banjo," which was an amazing antidote to the absolute anxiety-producing world of a conservatory. Then I started hanging out with the folks in the Washington folklore society, the Folklore Society of Greater Washington, I think is what it was called, I could be wrong about that. [Andy is correct— it is the Folklore Society of Greater Washington.] I started meeting all these people tangentially, like Steve Hickman, and going to Irish ceilidhs and going down to banjo jams in a little city park in DC, where we would sit and play Old Joe Clark for 15 minutes and then all just act like we'd seen God. My reaction to that, after all of these anxiety-producing years of playing classical music—which I do not put down at all, I love classical music. I still... that's some of my go to music to listen to and enjoy. But when I got into this traditional dance music which had fewer elements and I really could start feeling the beat, the pulse, the phrasing, and then people would get up and do flatfoot dancing. And then there was a little contra dance down there in downtown Washington. I got all involved in this. I've said this before, it's a bit trite, but I've said to myself, how long has THIS been going on? Because nobody told me that music could be this sociable, community based, low stress... but just, you could become excellent at it or you could just have a good old time. That really turned me around and caught my attention.

I met a man who still lives here in Vermont named Ahmet Baycu, and he was the son of a Turkish...well he was an immigrant himself, I think he'd come to America at about age 10, and he was studying to be an engineer, but what he really wanted to be was a banjo maker. He and I got to be friends and started building some banjos in Ahmet's basement. I was going to festivals and stuff, I remember going to festivals and sitting next to a flatbed truck with Doc Watson just like 20 feet away, picking away and it was more of the Southern music scene, banjo and all that. But then Ahmet, my friend Ahmet got this idea around 1975-1976 to move to Vermont. He wanted to go trout fishing and build banjos. That was his agenda, and mine was to get out of the suburbs and I don't know...head off almost anywhere. So he and I moved to Vermont in 1976 and started the Upper Falls Banjo Company, which as a business was an utter failure. We had no business plan, we had some knowledge, no real equipment, no real inventory, no knowledge of production or making a living doing this. (line break) But this takes me to my first contra dance, because we were sleeping in a friend's hayloft and fiddler by happenstance, but he didn't want us to stay there much longer and we needed to find a place. So we started driving all around southern Vermont and southern New Hampshire trying to find a place to rent that would have room for our shop. We were driving through Mill Hollow, Alstead, New Hampshire, and there was a sign that said Chases Mill, woodworking, and we just stopped there. There was a young woman there, a weaver named Gretchen Moeller. We just chatted up the afternoon with her, and she had a poster on her refrigerator, or on her door, and it said "contra dance." It was the coming Saturday night and it was at a place called Palmer's Dance Barn in Unity New Hampshire. Which is where, just coincidentally, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama made up a number of years ago and decided that Barack would be the candidate up in Unity, New Hampshire. But anyway, Ahmet and I went to this dance. When I walked in the band, was a fiddler by the name of Lark...Madigan at the time, and maybe still Lark Madigan, good friend up in the Walpole area, and a morris dance musician on the concertina. His name will pop into my head at a certain point. I had been listening to recordings by Rod and Randy Miller and had fallen in love with [Randy's piano playing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYjg3nLfyNQ) and had sort of been practicing up a lot of his riffs and lines. So I just said, do you mind if I sit in at the piano? It happened to be in tune with the concertina, which was a bit of a miracle, because we didn't have keyboards in those days. The piano player walked into a hall, sort of terrified at what piece of junk they were going to get to play for the dance. And they said, sure, we'd love you to sit down and I played and we had a lovely time, and I ended up playing with Lark and her husband, Chris, who's still a good friend for many, many years up at the [East Alstead dance](http://explore.vermontfolklifecenter.org/digital-archive/collections/items/show/430) and the Acworth dance. I went home that night just higher than a kite. I think I got paid $7, and the whole way home, I couldn't stop talking about what a perfect evening it was. My friend was a little grumpy, I have to say because he didn't think the quality of the dancing was nearly as high as it was in Washington. But he never followed through much on the contra scene, he got very involved in the old time scene here in New England, but that one night, I was sold at the world of contra dance. I just found the evening sitting on a stage playing these tunes with friends, making friends, meeting people, what's not to like? It was just glorious. So that really was my first New England contra dance, and the first time I got paid any money for playing contra dance music. We called it gas money in those days, and for a long time, that's all we ever expected. There was never any talk about, you know, earning a good wage or anything, you just expected to get paid nothing, a little symbolic honorarium.

But anyway, that's for me the very beginning. That's the genesis of how I got into New England contra dancing, and from there after a while the phone started ringing, and I started playing for people's weddings, people that are still friends of mine today. I think that's almost how I met them, was by going to play for their weddings. Then the phone rang one day and I was a bit taken aback, it was Dudley Laufman, who was looking for a piano player for a monthly dance up in South Stratford, Vermont. I ended up playing for a couple of years with Dudley and Jill and John Newton. John has passed away now, but Jill is still a friend and learned a lot from just watching Dudley in action. He'd come out of the break with his accordion on and lead singing. It was a very different scene. This is just getting me up into... from '76 up into the early '80s. And then, in the '80s it got richer, I came to Brattleboro to go to the School for International Training, which at that time, had a residential program of foreign students here learning English... they don't have that program anymore. So there was always this big community of people from all over the world and I thought, these people need a contra dance here. So we started a little, maybe three or four times a year, a contra dance there at SIT, and that's when I learned how to teach people that didn't even speak English how to contra dance, it was all by demonstration and just by having a good spirit and a good optimistic attitude. That got me more on the education side of things. After I finished the program there, my first job after getting my degree there was to work at the Farm and Wilderness camp. I worked at the teen camp where I worked with Henry Chapin, who's still a very good friend from New York City.... Henry and I, that first year, he was the caller and I led the band, and the band was whatever kid walked in the door with whatever instrument, it's called the F and W String Band. I ended up editing their tune book that year and learning how to manage beginners on the stage as well as on the dance floor. Then the next year, Henry didn't come back, Henry couldn't come and work at the camp, so I became the caller the next year, which meant I was doing a staff dance, a teen dance, a dance for the younger kids. It was trial by fire... like okay, now run a complete summer camp dance program. After that, I started subbing in the schools as a music teacher, and that got me going on a whole career as a music educator, which was still connected, because I always taught all my students how to contra and square dance as part of my music program. So that's how I got into it.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of great parts to that story.

**Andy Davis**

You could flesh that out pretty extremely.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I need a moment to process all of that.

**Andy Davis**

I'm a little exhausted too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, it's amazing these little moments in life that lead us to what ends up being our destiny in a sense. It's funny how that happens. When you played piano for your first contra dance, that was up in New England? You didn't play piano down in DC?

**Andy Davis**

I don't think I ever played piano once down in Virginia. I came here to build banjos and play, but we had an old clunker piano at the farmhouse we ended up renting in Perkinsville, Vermont, which is where they mine a lot of the Vermont soapstone, and we turned that big old farmhouse into, Ahmet and I, where we were the roomies that ran that house. We used to have these Sunday night movie parties, where people would come over and we'd get 16 millimeter movies from the local library. Things like "Nanook of the North" and great films, the classic documentaries and stuff. We'd watch them, have a potluck supper and then we'd play music. There was a piano there, and that's really where I started playing bass lines, but it was mostly the old time music. I was starting to listen to Randy, and I thought, this has got a lot more going on harmonically in some ways. I still love playing piano for old time music, whenever I do I try to pull out my old Riley Puckett baselines and things from the old 78s and treat it a little bit more like old string band music. Randy's approach was very clean and crisp and had a bit of this...ceilidh band in it. It had a little bit of really, really well-thought-out Scottish backup. It was just so tasteful, he mostly plays fiddle now. Randy was phenomenal at the piano with his brother Rodney in those days, they were just, they were a band. I started really learning how to play well-thought-out accompaniments at those contra dances, and we never played medleys. I still have a vague memory of one night after a couple of years of playing with Chris and Lark at East Alstead and we had a fiddler named Brandon Little and his brother Jason Little would sit in sometimes on mandolin, so we called ourselves the Little Band. Not so much that they ran the band, but we just liked their name. So we were the Little Band. I remember one night at a contra dance somebody in the band brought up the idea of a medley, and I swear, the rest of us said, what's a medley?

**Julie Vallimont**

To be clear, this is a medley of tunes, not even of dances, just of tunes.

**Andy Davis**

The aesthetic in those early days were, the caller picked the dance, the band picked a tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

How simple.

**Andy Davis**

It was a beautiful thing. So then we started going, oh, we could switch from that to another tune, and then that started sort of moving around. So that was an interesting little porthole back into the past. I was one time at [Pinewoods](http://www.pinewoods.org/)...Pinewoods 1981 was another really seminal moment. I was sitting at home. I had left the banjo company after only one year, it just wasn't going to work. I had moved into my own digs in New Hampshire. One day I was sitting at home and the phone rang and it was Fred Breunig, and Fred said, I'm the program chair of American Week, and in just two or three weeks from now I need another musician for classes and I'm short one musician, you think you could come down and back up Chuck Luce, who was this older man from Chelsea, Vermont. I said, yeah, I've heard of Pinewoods, never been, sure I'll come down to give it a try. And I didn't have a steady job. I was kind of a music bum, and I had a truck and I did odd jobs. So I went down to Pinewoods and Fred, that year, 1981 had hired a staff.... I would say, I think I have my year right there '81... had hired a staff that was almost entirely 60 years of age or over. or maybe in their 50s. They were all people who were lifers. There was a fiddler from Newfoundland named Émile Benoît. There was Chuck Luce, who was elderly from rural Vermont. There was this man who'd been the West Virginia fiddle champ, [and there was] Bob McQuillen. It was an amazing staff for a young person getting into this music to hang out with. Because they were all masters of what they did. They knew who they were musically. They knew what they had to share it and they just did it, and they wanted to share it. And they were friendly. So I backed up Chuck Luce and had really a life changing week at Pinewoods and have been back to Pinewoods many, many, many, many times, almost without a missed summer from those times. Later, my wife and I got into leading family... program chairing Family Week, which was our big thing for many years. In the early days, I would go as a dance musician to back up stuff. Pinewoods was a huge, huge influence, like a kind of a big, beautiful pressure cooker, where you would just go for a week of intoxicating.... I used to go to every class period. I'd get exhausted. I'd get hoarse, I couldn't sing by Thursday. One day I was sitting in the dining room and I just overheard a conversation at the other end of the table, these two people talking about going canoeing during the period after lunch and I thought to myself, you're allowed to do that?

**Julie Vallimont**

I was like you.

**Andy Davis**

I was there to just out of bed... buuuuooooooom until three in the morning crash, don't miss breakfast.

**Julie Vallimont**

My first year there at [Pinewoods] American Week I did exactly that. Just like you, I went to all the classes, I stayed up till 4 a.m. every night playing tunes. I didn't go to breakfast, I would drag myself up at, like, 8:55 to get to the 9 a.m. thing. We talk about these places that end up being, like, seminal learning and meeting places for musicians and callers. Ashokan has come up a lot recently but Pinewoods is another of those places and also places like Maine Fiddle Camp for a lot of people. There's a few other places, and I think it's an interesting thing that just keeps coming up over and over and over again for people, is that these kinds of places are where you meet like-minded people. I made friends that first year at Pinewoods that are, like, my lifelong music friends.

**Andy Davis**

I would like to broaden that out into, we're in the music world, so we think of these nodes as being music camps. One of the things I've loved doing as a caller over the years is doing a lot of what some people call one night stands. I've never really liked that terminology. I like to call a lot of the dances I've done for years as annual dances. It's the night where the big square dance, I called one for many years for Marlboro Music [Festival], like the world's greatest chamber musicians, half of them would be holding a beer during the walkthrough, and then I'd remind them to put their beers down for the dance. These dances that happen only once a year, but the thing I wanted to comment on was that camp life... so many people in all walks of life who have that camp experience, especially when it's intergenerational, they have many customs and things, and occasionally the night of the summer contra or square dance is a highlight. I meet these people all the time that will say things like, oh, yeah, it wasn't a music camp, but the night we all look forward to was the night of the dance. There would be some local caller sometimes with a record player come in, but it was the most magical time. And you know, it goes beyond the walls of music. It just permeates, and I love living in New England. I think I think the whole Appalachian Mountain thing is this amazing music machine. One time Rodney Miller and I, when Rod and Randy stopped playing, I had a few years there of being Rod's accompanist. We never made any professional recordings, but boy, did we have fun. We did a lot of tours and trips to New York and up and down the East Coast. One time we were playing down in Nashville and the guy that introduced us said "And here's Rod Miller and Andy Davis, they're from the northern end of the southern mountains." Since I had grown up in Virginia, largely, I really love that I've always thought about this mountain chain that goes from Gaspé to Georgia is just filled with music. It's just from Quebec, all the way down to North Carolina and Tennessee and all the way down. It's just rich.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thank you, plate tectonics.

**Andy Davis**

Yeah, exactly. This old crumbling mountain chain that used to be bigger than the Rockies.

**Julie Vallimont**

Plate tectonics, plus glaciers, plus erosion has done a lot for us.

**Andy Davis**

The summer camp thing, Pinewoods, I went to Ashokan a number of years with Rodney. Another person that I don't think I did too many camps with, but a few festivals with [Laurie Andres](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQDa7LDTuhA), who really got me started on the accordion. That picks up a thread from those early days, when we would get to a hall and my fiddler friend would very carefully open up their fiddle case and take out their beloved instrument. I'd be looking around sort of wondering how many strings were broken on this piano and after a while, I started playing music with Laurie Andres, who played piano accordion. I thought, Laurie, that's a pretty good gig, you get to the gig, you take out a really nice accordion and I said, "I want to start doing that." So I went out and got my first accordion. And, you know, that's in some ways my main instrument now, though I still love playing the piano. Laurie really inspired me to play the accordion.

**Julie Vallimont**

How did you learn accordion once you got one?

**Andy Davis**

Well, I knew the keyboard, and I knew music theory because remember, I'd been a baroque music geek. So I really knew the circle of fifths and how voices lead and so the left hand wasn't that hard to figure out. It was just like a big chord machine. I knew fingering, I'd had my piano lessons from age seven, and I knew how to finger a scale and play my arpeggios and it was really just modeling it for this style of music and just enjoying it. Laurie and I still like to joke that the highest compliment we ever get on the piano accordion is if somebody says to us, " I like the way you play that it sounds like a button accordion." That was Laurie's big thing, is the use of the bellows to really... not just have a have a lugubrious flow of air but to have the bellows bouncing and rocking the tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Laurie's style, it's full of life and energy and a lot of bounce and a lot of swing and a lot of ornamentations.

**Andy Davis**

Laurie's never been a jazz improviser on the accordion. He helped mold my own aesthetic, and Rodney Miller as well, and currently my favorite fiddler to play with is Laurie Indenbaum from Athens, Vermont here. Just play the tune, but put yourself into it. You don't need to go off on variations. Just put your heart into the tune and play it in your own style. Rodney, until he got involved in Contrazz and the whole idea of improvisation...I used to love dancing to Rodney, because he could put ornaments on top of ornaments. He was just so playful with the melody but always playing the melody. I felt Laurie was much like that too. And Laurie, I'll say one other fun story about medleys, which I saw your eyes sort of light up even just considering a time when one dance went with one tune. I remember one time playing for the Dawn Dance here in Brattleboro, and the caller came over and said, "we're going to be doing Chorus Jig and you think you could switch into..." and he started listing all these tunes that would make this excellent Chorus Jig medley, and we listened to him politely. He went back to the caller's mic and Laurie turned to me and said, "Let's play Chorus Jig." We just played Chorus Jig and afterwards the caller came over and said, "That was perfect."

**Julie Vallimont**

Did the caller notice that you hadn't changed tunes in the middle?

**Andy Davis**

I think so.

**Julie Vallimont**

But it worked out and they were happy with your choice. I mean, a lot of people play Opera Reel, and it's funny that that probably was a crazy idea when it happened and now it's like the thing you do.

**Andy Davis**

I think that's cool, too. I'm not against innovation, I sometimes get a little.......and I know I've gotten into it as a caller of, like, pointing out to the band where the balances are and if there's a hey or whether I might like a jig or a reel. I know that, that's fun. That's part of the evolution of a more intentional matching choreography with the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's the first time I've ever inhaled my water during the interview, I got so excited.

**Andy Davis**

I know that from playing with beginning musicians, because I do a camp here in Brattleboro with Keith Murphy and Becky Tracy and have for quite a few years, lost count, which is called Traditional Music and Arts camp, which we just call Trad camp. When you're playing with beginning musicians, you often want them to play something they really want to play and something they're good at. The thing is really true, that you can still dance any standard contra to any standard tune, and sometimes you get little beautiful surprises when you play some unexpected thing that doesn't follow this, like, this is where I need these and this is where I need these. Which brings me to another anecdote with Laurie, where another caller started going over all of the aspects of the of the dance and where the balances and swings were and where all the little things were in the gypsies and such. We can talk about gypsies and language in a minute if we wish to. But after he went through the whole roadmap of the dance and walked back to the caller's mic Laurie looked at me and he said, "I think he wants us to play something we want to play." I always love that story and I often tell it, and then after the dance, of course, the caller comes over and says "That was perfect." Well of course it was perfect, we were playing it and we were watching the dance while we played it.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of different ways to do it. You could try to match the tune and the dance with surgical precision or you can just pick a good tune that has the right kind of feel and then watch the dancers and add the right feeling.

**Andy Davis**

Or you can just kick back and have fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right. Who knew that fun is fun?

**Andy Davis**

So anyway, I don't want to sound too curmudgeonly, I get accused of that occasionally. I love it when Dudley Laufman signs in on some of the listservs I occasionally participate in, when I see Dudley Laufman, I know I'm gonna just enjoy his post immensely. Because he’s earned the right to have an opinion, whatever you think of his opinions, and he's so artful and so expressive, and so heartfelt. I think we can still learn from...... that time I was at Pinewoods I had a free period where I wasn't playing for a class and I went to Bob McQuillen's class that Fred had given Bob, it was simply called Northeast Tunes and Tales. It was basically Bob in the camp house doing whatever the hell he wanted to do.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's great. That's perfect.

**Andy Davis**

People could talk and then if a tune got mentioned, he'd say, "Well, does anyone know that tune? Let's play that tune." I still remember asking Bob the question. I didn't know him that well at the time and I said, "Bob, what's the biggest difference between the contra dance world in the Monadnock region when you were playing with Ralph Page and you were brand new to the accordion and the piano, (and you know, he'd grown up with this whole thing, he was in that heyday), and today?", and he said, "Well, Andy, the biggest difference, I think, was it was just us. Nobody ever came from anywhere else to our dances, it was just what we did. We knew everybody there and it was just us." I'm not holding that up as some kind of ideal. I just thought it was interesting that the Monadnock region had kind of hung on to this tenaciously when the rest of the country had moved on to really hit square dancing was hip and new. And of course, the squares got pulled in as an additional flavor in the evening, we always did two sets of squares, you didn't go to a contra without two sets of squares. I remember that as boilerplate in the '70s and early '80s. If you went to contra dance, there'd always be a couple sets of squares. People love them, and my hat is off to Nils [Fredland], and you know, our just recently departed wonderful caller from Connecticut.

**Julie Vallimont**

Ralph Sweet.

**Andy Davis**

Ralph Sweet, who stayed the course. I'm having a hard time with names. Tod Whittemore's really stayed, and he learned a lot of squares, and Fred Breunig was another one, when he got to Putney, he learned all [the squares that Smitty [Basil Smith] called](https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/993) up at Pierce's Hall. Fred still has all those. He interviewed Smitty and got all Smitty's calls. When he took over the Putney dance, he always did sets of Smitty squares... he continued that tradition on, and I think squares are so fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Tony Parkes?

**Andy Davis**

I can't leave Tony Parkes out. I love playing for Tony. He got to call up at the dance up in Williamstown [MA] before this COVID thing came in and had a wonderful evening playing music with Tony and a bunch of friends. He's such a great caller and so skilled with whatever level's on the floor. Tony just set the knob. He just set it right where it's supposed to be. And I love that. Tony's square dance calling is phenomenal. We did a lot of couple dances in those days. There was always, I think almost always after a set of squares, or starting up the second half, and we used to do the Gay Gordons and Road to the Isles and Salty Dog Rag, or a polka, Norwegian polka, waltzes, obviously, at the beginning and the end, but there was a little more sprinkling in of couple dances throughout the evening, which I remember really enjoying. It was good as a musician, you had to know all of those specific tunes, because if the caller turned and said Road to the Isles you're expected to know Road to the Isles at a New England contra dance. That was kind of cool. I think there was a little more of a defined repertoire in those days, there was a little more of a core repertoire. I think one of the things that we now enjoy as an infinite repertoire. Sometimes I'm at a session, especially with younger players, and I don't know many of the tunes, the current tunes, partly because several of them have been written in the last three weeks.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Andy Davis**

There's been such a wonderful explosion of creativity. But I do remember that it felt a little bit like in those early days, and maybe it was just self-deception that you could kind of learn the New England repertoire, it was a learnable repertoire. It had sort of, not an end, but it had a big common middle that people could just call out Fisher's Hornpipe. Everybody knew Fisher's Hornpipe, you could just call out Off She Goes and everyone was like, yeah, I love playing Off She Goes, and it was just this core of jigs and reels, Smash the Windows and Staten Island Hornpipe. We all knew all these tunes, and it was wonderful, and it still is wonderful. I'm not one who thinks that it was better in the past. It just was, it was what it was, and now it's incredible. This year has just been interesting because it kind of stopped us in our tracks.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of things are paused right now.

**Andy Davis**

What are some other topics? We've kind of covered a few topics.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, we've just begun because I want to talk about tunes some more. I think it's an interesting question about what you're talking about, of having a core repertoire of contra music that everyone knows, I love new tunes, I sometimes write tunes, I love learning new tunes voraciously. And yet, there is just nothing like the feeling of a bunch of people up on stage all playing a tune that they've all played a million times before. Because you're not in your head, you're not thinking about how it goes, trying to think of cool chords, you're not trying to impress anybody, you can just be together in the moment. I mean, that's what's fun about dancing Chorus Jig or Money Musk, is that you all know the dance, you don't have to think about it. That's also what allows these pickup bands to happen, which have been such an important part of the contra way of doing things for so long, like different combinations of musicians who play with each other and learn from each other. Without that core repertoire, that becomes a lot harder.

**Andy Davis**

One thing that sometimes happens, especially in our country, where we're very polarized about virtually everything, is that people can get into a conversation and then think that oh, writing and learning new tunes is sort of in opposition to having a static solid traditional repertoire. No, I don't think so at all. I think it's possible for a musician to be writing new tunes, but also...... here's how I think of it, and I had mentioned earlier going to folk festivals where Doc Watson was a young man, and his son there who died so tragically was backing him up on second guitar and go into these festivals like in Galax and different places in West Virginia and Virginia and seeing three or four people leaning against a vehicle out in the parking lot playing Bullet the Wagon, for what seemed like an eternity and every note perfect. And everyone just kind of slack jaw and I mean that as a compliment. What made me think of that is when you said "wearing it like an old shoe" and not having to think about it, just playing it, just being it. I would say, it's not playing a tune, you just are that tune for that period of time. I always love that. I think one of the biggest dynamics that's happened in contra dance music is the rehearsal and the band, the rehearsed band and getting together and playing is a kind of rehearsal. But arranging adds a new dimension, and I'm not passing judgment on it. It's just been one of the things I've observed is the idea of the arranged sound, which doesn't mean it's all pre-planned. There's all sorts of surprises can happen. I do remember my early experience in playing for contra dances, the one dance, one tune was more like, just get in the zone with the tune you love and it'll work and everyone will have fun. It's just a change, it's an evolution. I've sometimes thought, well, maybe it's uniquely American, because look what happened to jazz, from the teens in New Orleans with just Dixieland jazz. In 50 years, we went through bebop, cool jazz, funk, swing back in the 30s and 40s. Look at the evolution of a single style of music. I sometimes think is that sort of what the stream we're in with contra music is, that we're on an evolving thing because that's a fundamental value of American society is innovation. I once had a professor who said, America, it's a culture that's nostalgic for the future. We are a very innovative society. We want to experience new things. Contra dance music is, I think, participates in that same well of American culture of innovation and change.

**Julie Vallimont**

As a living tradition. It has to reflect the culture who's creating it.

**Andy Davis**

I think it's doing what it what it needs to do, and it may be like a pendulum. It may be that at some point, people want to go back to a fiddler and a piano player who played like they've played together for 30 years and that's all you need. I used to think of New England music as the fiddle and the piano, the way the southern string band music was the fiddle and the banjo, you had a melody instrument, and you had a backup instrument. That's really all you need. Everything else is just frosting on the cake, it's just piling on more sprinkles. You know, when you add in mandolin, and bass and guitar and all this stuff, but all you really need for a swinging dance, especially before sound systems was that thump of the piano and maybe a cheesy mic on the fiddle, and boy, people could have just a wild time with that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely. You know, the scientist in me can't resist talking about evolution for a second. Because I think in popular culture, there's this misconception that evolution implies a linear progression of improvement, that something is "more" evolved or less evolved, and that by evolving, it becomes better. But that's not actually how evolution works, it's just change over time. An organism could be perfectly adapted for one environment, and then the environment disappears, and it becomes extinct. So it's only as well evolved as its environment lets it be. I remember there was a dance event called Contra Evolution for a while and it was featuring, like, electronic music. I played in it with my band, Double Apex and then [Firecloud](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4j4FNeBLS0g), and Perpetual e-Motion was there. I remember at the time feeling like I'm not trying to imply that I think this is better. Unfortunately, this misunderstanding of evolution has been used to justify a lot of bad human behavior. It just changes, and some things stick around, and some things don't, and, you know, things just kind of happen.

**Andy Davis**

Well, [my son Arthur](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-6-arthur-davis/), who's a geologist, I love it, I've learned so much from talking to Arthur and disruption, followed by adaptation, it changed the way I've thought about the relationship between geology and biology. I always thought they were sort of on separate tracks. But part of why we have such a diverse biology on earth is because we have such a dynamic geology. You mentioned tectonic plates, the fact that everything is shifting and moving, and we're on a tilt. So we have the change of the seasons and we have water where it meets the land, and what Rachel Carson called the marginal way, where the temperature and the level of moisture is constantly changing and where the sea creatures start to merge with the land creatures. It becomes this engine of innovation and change. I think that partly what happens in the United States is with mobility and getting back to the subject at hand, I've heard people say, oh, Dudley, I remember driving from Indiana to go to a Dudley dance in Peterborough. Okay, so that's a little bit like a dust storm coming along and spreading the seeds over a 300-mile area instead of where they usually were hanging out in only just a little corner of the of the environment. There was this casting of the seed when people like Dudley came along, who were very charismatic, and that was very different from what Bob was talking about. We just did it and nobody ever came by, we didn't know anybody was even interested in us.

**Julie Vallimont**

Which happens with organisms on islands who are otherwise isolated. Exactly, and then of course, with recording, I remember [one of the things that Rod and Randy brought in was Irish music](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjBUkMSI1kw). There were sort of Irish origin tunes in the old time New England repertoire, but nobody played them like Irish tunes. When you look at certain tunes that were standards in the New England repertoire, they were played kind of in a Yankee style, but Rod and Randy, you know, Randy did those Fiddlecase Books of Michael Coleman tunes and all of a sudden, everybody was really into Irish music and realizing this fits with contra dancing, and then we heard about Cape Breton music. I remember when that blew through, and Jerry Holland came to town and everybody was like, whoa! And then someone heard Marcel Messervier or Philippe Bruneau and it was like, Jean Carignan, and it was like, Québec! The beautiful thing we haven't talked about is that New England music itself is a big collision of multiple continents, what we have here is these different... Yankee culture, in the music we have this Yankee culture, we have this Québécois culture and we've always played Québécois tunes. We've played them in a kind of Yankee style, but we've had a huge number of Québécois tunes in the repertoire. And then the Scottish music, the Cape Breton music. I know that's a very Eurocentric view of diversity in New England. And I have to say that the diversity is, we have a strong African American pulse in New England history, and Native American, and other cultures as well. Vermont is filled with immigrants from Poland and Italy and people that came here to do machine shop work. I remember playing, talk about fun anecdotes, we used to play up at Pierce's Hall with Fred, and I was in a band called The Tune Police, which was a little bit of a joke on this whole issue of you know, that's not a good medley, you just put an old time tune next to a Cape Breton tune and so jokingly the Tune Police was a bit of a concept. We don't want to upset the Tune Police. There was this man from Springfield that used to come down…Walter Bellzack, he was Polish, and when Walter came in, he had a smile that just was as wide as the room, and he had his tambourine, and we were always welcoming to Walter. Really? Good for you! [jokingly referring to the tambourine]

**Andy Davis**

Always, Walter would sit there, and he was an older guy, and he eventually passed away. But I still can remember Walter sitting there on the stage in his chair playing along on his tambourine, and he just, hey, there's a dance down to Pierce's Hall. I'm gonna go play. I just loved that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think it's so important to cultivate that spirit of welcoming-ness and I've tried to become a better person over the years. But anytime I see a tambourine, spoons or harmonica, I think my brain is like, no, no, oh, no. Then you know, you're nice and you welcome the person and often it works out.

**Andy Davis**

Well as an accordion player, I have to be kind, because I keep getting these cartoons, like the four instruments of the apocalypse. One of them is the accordion.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, there's plenty of times when people think that about us when we walk up with an accordion, right? So we understand.

**Andy Davis**

Especially the piano accordion, because you play piano accordion, right? Oh, you can do a lot of damage with the piano accordion.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, yeah, they're so loud.

**Andy Davis**

You could destroy. The left hand can actually become like a tonal bulldozer. One time I was in Ireland and I was just off on the edge of this session and I was not really playing loud at all. Because I just didn't know all the tunes and they were playing a million miles an hour. I was starting to feel like hey, I was a little part of this fun scene. I look up and right over the piano was one of those international "no parking signs," but instead of a P in it there was a piano accordion.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, Dudley would tell the story of being at a festival and there's a wonderful jam of musicians... all played button accordion, and he walked up with a piano accordion and they would just close their cases and get up and walk away. He can tell the whole story in all its detail, of course, being Dudley, but piano accordions were not always accepted. Button accordions, if we want to geek out about accordions for a second, having a smaller bellows gives you a lot more punch in your playing. The fact that these instruments play a different note on the push-pull means you have to change bellows direction a lot more often, which on a piano accordion it's really easy just to smear the notes over everything. You can play your bellows for a long time, you don't have to leave spaces between notes, you can play all these notes at once, it can be very sloppy.

**Andy Davis**

I think one of the best things I really try to model with Laurie is when playing in a contra band, especially when there's accompaniment, is your left hand becomes very much an accent and a spice. You're not expected to synchronize yourself and play the full accompaniment in the left hand, you're a melody instrument, like another fiddle in the band. If you want to come in on the ones and the fives in your left hand because we're all going to agree about certain places. If you just start wailing on that left hand, especially in a not very light, punchy way, it just kind of takes the whole rhythm and just kind of like... load cinderblocks on it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Andy Davis**

So anyway, I do think it's a wonderful question, the one about welcoming. I was thinking before I came over, I looked at your list of things and you said an anecdote from a particular gig. Not too long ago, I think it was last fall, I was playing at Pierce's Hall [in Putney, VT], with Laurie and with Amy Cann and with all these names again, boy, I know you're going to edit this. So all of my umms and everything are going to be taken out, so I just remember people's names immediately. Carol Compton was playing and the thing I think I really remember, I believe I was calling, there was a family of immigrants there who moved to Southern Vermont who were from Mexico. They didn't know how to do this. I've traveled in Mexico, I think they felt so at home at a community dance. It was so village-like and I just thought it was a wonderful thing, that I think Amy might have even commented on it in an article that got published somewhere. It was really sad that the dances have shut down. But they just had a wonderful time. I remember the father was wearing his cowboy hat the whole evening. They were just having a lovely time. I felt that the dancers were being totally welcoming. It was just a beautiful moment of just community building. I love playing with those bands the all comers band. I love calling for those bands.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, it's so much fun.

**Andy Davis**

I love doing that. What else can we cover, the tunes?

**Julie Vallimont**

Touching on what you were saying a little bit about different cultures. I think, at its best, the spirit of contra dance can be very welcoming and friendly. I guess I feel like I should add that contra dance isn't always inviting to people. There is a long history, like you say, of people of color in Vermont and throughout, and yet that history hasn't always been included or incorporated or acknowledged. I don't even know enough about it to talk about it intelligently or to give it justice because we haven't done a really great job of including those traditions in our tradition and giving them credit. That's something that I know CDSS has started working on, and there are other people thinking about it, but I just want to say that that's another place where we can grow and evolve and change, and you had mentioned the word gypsy before as well [as being problematic].

**Andy Davis**

The whole issue of language we could probably do a couple of hour conversations just on...... I find myself trying to become bilingual, trilingual, quatro lingual, depending on if I'm working with a family dance, where I might never even use the word "partner"... I would use the word partner, but what I'm saying is, I would never use the word or need to use the word gent or lady or any identifying feature about any dancer on the floor. It's all about who's next to you. But the figures are easy, and then other times I'll be calling somewhere and people really want to hear Gents and Ladies," it's a crowd that's been dancing for years and years and they don't really want to shift to a new language. And then other times, I've called for the annual meeting of the New England Friends, and they really like Larks and Ravens and they really like the completely non-gender-specific language. I think a caller today needs to be sensitive to all of that and not just say, "Well, this is what I do." You choose your dances, you adjust your teaching style, you adjust your stage manner and you adjust some of your vocabulary so that people feel comfortable. I think that the job of being a caller in a society that really is still trying to live out the ideals of our culture and our nation needs to do that. I will say this, sometimes we've had these conversations, I don't think this means that every organization needs to do everybody's culture.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, nor should they.

**Andy Davis**

There's a quote, I don't know who I got it from, who said that if we all try to learn everybody else's culture, we'll have no reason to ever travel to visit them and we'll have even less reason to stay home. Which is a sort of a dark analysis, but it's sort of saying it's okay to nurture what you have decided, expresses you. I think what it's about is to do it in a way that welcomes anyone who walks in the door.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right.

**Andy Davis**

That but we don't have to try to do everybody's culture.

**Julie Vallimont**

No, nor should we.

**Andy Davis**

I think it would be not very respectful. You don't want to see me tackle certain cultures, let me tell you, but I think I have tried in my calling, to no matter who walks in the door. I've led a grand march with the other person, my partner was someone in a motorized wheelchair. It worked, we made it happen, it can happen. You can find a way to include people not just as participants, but as leaders. A lot of that I learned because the one thing we haven't talked about is, I did 32 years in the public schools, and one of the pieces of music I'd love for you to share is a recording I used to do every year with my intergenerational chorus, a singing square, where I would teach the whole chorus, all the calls. I would play piano, they would sing and eight kids would get out and do the dance. We just did many of the of the classic squares. I gave you one that I particularly like, "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." That was one of my ways of introducing New England dance traditions to children in the elementary level, where they left thinking like, "oh, I could call a square dance, oh, I love square dancing." "Can I be the one in the concert, I want to dance in the costume." It was like developing that sense of ownership, and that these traditions are basically fun and get to the point where sixth graders, people like the maligned sixth graders, but sixth graders, they can really dance. If you start them in kindergarten joining hands in a circle, we might have to explain to certain people what joining hands is, Julie, because I haven't done it since, like, February.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like riding a bike, someday we'll touch people again.

**Andy Davis**

It's still there. Anyway, these kids would work with me from kindergarten to sixth grade and by the time they were in grades four or five and six they were really pretty good dancers, and they wouldn't balk at joining hands and circling left with anybody, join hands and circle left, you got it, man.

**Julie Vallimont**

That was not my childhood experience.

**Andy Davis**

I know, I learned it in the schools from a PE teacher who didn't understand the social side of it or the social pitfalls of it and deal with that. I know that my colleague Peter Amidon, we had our little group [New England Dancing Masters](https://dancingmasters.com/), Peter [Amidon] and Mary Cay Brass, and Peter and Mary Alice [Amidon] and I, we were invaluable to one another, because we would work this stuff out in the early days of our career, and then we'd come and share it. Kids need to know that being assigned a partner in a square dance does not mean they're getting married. It doesn't even mean you're going steady. It doesn't even mean you're friends. It actually means just about nothing. It just means you're going to be nice to each other and learn this fun activity, and then at the end, you're going to say, thank you. And as soon as you say thank you, it's not only allowed to, it's expected that you will turn around and walk away. But if you don't explain it to young people, the way the whole system works, and you just say this is your partner, and now we're going to learn the dance, they're uncomfortable. Because they're afraid they're going to get teased about who their partner was. You have to get the whole... it's again, community building to get everybody knowing what the system is and it works in a way that's friendly, and it's polite. I tell you, we all at New England Dancing Masters, we used to aspire to get the kids to the point where they could dance Gents with Ladies. The last number of years of my career it was, teach them how to ask another human being to dance. Anybody can dance with anybody, as long as you're treating them with respect. If you pick somebody you just want to fool around with and punch and push, you can't dance. It was what we were doing with children in the schools was mirrored in what's more happening on the dance floor. A favorite anecdote, I was calling down at the Stone Church here in Brattleboro a couple years ago, and my son and his girlfriend were at the top of the set and I was getting ready to do an improper contra. I just sort of went off mic and I said, you guys need to cross over and my son looked at me said, "We are crossed over." Ouch! I just learned so much from that moment. Oh, that cured me of expecting anything on the dance floor. Make no assumptions.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's great. That's evolution.

**Andy Davis**

Anyway, I remember coming home from some community dances, some weddings, sometimes on my own, because I met the band at the gig, and then it was an hour drive home to Brattleboro through a winter night. I can just remember driving home so many times just feeling so filled, just like what could I be doing with my life better than having been a part of that evening that was just shared where people just were good to one another, and were happy and felt connected, and joyful? I've just been very blessed to be part of this, and I met my wife, Robin, contra dancing. I used to not make a big deal about that side of the tradition with my school children.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's the thing is, we could sit here and analyze this or talk about that, but it doesn't really matter. You know, we can't dance right now, so we can talk about dancing. But what matters is just that moment, when you show up in the hall and you make friends, you feel welcome, you have a good time. I was a teacher for a long time and I'd have the stress of the day, and I'd be mentally fatigued, and after a night of dancing my brain felt different. You just dance all the stress away and you're with people and we're all so cut off in our lives and being where you can just touch people and interact with them and make friends.

**Andy Davis**

When I was in college, totally aimless in terms of...directionless, "no direction home," to quote Bob Dylan, totally confused about what I was supposed to do with my life, I took a psychology class, thinking that would give me some insight. It provided very little insight, but I do remember learning about a variety of different counseling theories. One of them was this guy, he had the principle of uninterrupted positive regard. Do you remember who that therapist was? He was a humanist, was it Carl Rogers maybe... does that name ring a bell? It might have been Carl Rogers. [It is Carl Rogers.] He had this idea of the uninterrupted positive regard and it didn't really matter what the therapist's intellectual structure was. If the therapist showed uninterrupted positive regard, that progress would be made for the client. I remember going to the Dublin dance in late 70s, maybe '78-'79, Dublin, New Hampshire, Jack Perron calling, Rod and Randy Miller, they were the regular band. That was another thing I'd love to get back to that was different. And walking out of that hall to drive home, and my little '69 VW Beetle, alone, I kept thinking I was going to meet somebody, but didn't always happen. Remembering what Carl Rogers has said, I just spent two hours of uninterrupted positive regard. Every single person I met smiled and was lovely. One time I was calling a dance for the Dover elementary school, and Dr. Backes, who's quite a well-known retired doctor now, he came up to me, after the dance, and he said, "Andy, this should be called community mental health." So maybe this COVID-19 pause is a time for us to look at the big picture. It's so easy to be busy on the merry go round, gigs and festivals and tours and booking and all that stuff, and recording sessions and all that. It may be good to take a moment here in 2020 when we're supposed to have good clear 20/20 vision, right? I do have a feeling that when we start coming back into dancing, it's going to be small venues. It's going to be backyards. It's going to be kind of a little more like the church basement in East Alstead, New Hampshire and a little bit less...for all its wonders, the Greenfield... I think it's going to be a while before we pack 150 people into a big hall. I can see eight people getting together for an evening of square, 8,10,12 people getting together for a kitchen junket in somebody's dining room. Where we can trace it and we know if something breaks out, we all know who we were with. It's a little bit what's happening with music now, most of the sessions I'm playing with are not band rehearsals, they're just four or five other people that want to get together in a backyard and sit in a big circle and we just go around, we always follow the same map, you just go around in a circle and everybody picks a tune. It's not about practicing for anything or getting ready for a gig, it's just for the joy of playing. I think that we might take something away from this year that is very wonderful if we can pull that. There was another little point. Oh, yeah, talking about bands and callers. If you don't mind me just going down memory lane again. Dances had regular callers and regular bands. That was part of why you went down to a certain hall, because Duke Miller was calling there with such and such a group of musicians and that was the regular scene at that dance. Kind of like [David Millstone playing with Northern Spy up at the Norwich Hall in Norwich, Vermont](https://www.davidmillstonedance.com/2-general-content/default/37-contra-dance-with-northern-spy). If you went to East Alstead, you would get Chris Madigan and the Little Band. If you went to Dublin [New Hampshire], you got Jack Perron and the Miller brothers. They were smaller halls I think, maybe not always but there wasn't this idea of who's playing that dance this month. I'm not saying that's good or bad. But it is part of an evolution that's happened where people book a season of surprises and touring bands instead of each hall having its kind of sound and its repertoire. People used to say the reason singing calls, the call doesn't always happen before the figure in singing calls. That's because everybody knows the dance. You're not calling to tell them anything, you're just having fun. The other joke there is you know why all the calls and the singing squares are aimed at the gents’ part? Because the women all knew what to do. I have been lucky to have spent '76 to now, how many years is that? That's 45-46 years. I've spent over 40 years just having an unending string of family camps and dances, weddings, and school concerts. It's a little overwhelming. It's been just apple pie festivals and old home days and....

**Julie Vallimont**

What an amazing abundance, all sorts of experiences.

**Andy Davis**

And I'm still not tired of it. That's the funny thing. I'm still looking forward to tomorrow when a few friends come over. We're gonna play Québécois tunes for a couple of hours.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, my favorite.

**Andy Davis**

David Kaynor is another one that I'd love to do a shout out in this interview because he's world famous as a caller and a fiddler. What I love about David, and I've had the chance to tell him this numerous times in the last couple of years, that he is such a genius at inclusion. I was at a session once—and this sums it up for me—and he and another musician were here at Northern Roots, were in charge of a New England jam. The other musician was running down tunes and they were all kind of busy tunes. And they were going to decide on what the opening tune was and David, his brow was a little furrowed, like he was thinking and the other musician listed three or four reels that were quite note-y, and then David, who was using his keyboard [to communicate] at the time, his finger started going and everybody got quiet and then he hit the button and out of the computer came Road to Boston.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah!!!

**Andy Davis**

It was the perfect tune, and that room just exploded because everybody knew it, from the beginners to the old hands and he had the genius to say maybe we shouldn't be playing Music in the Glen or Fisher's Hornpipe, we should be playing Road to Boston at least to get this thing off the ground.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because it's a less note-y tune, more accessible.

**Andy Davis**

Totally less note-y even if you don't know it. If you've learned a few tunes by ear you're gonna pick it up. I think that's been a bit of a theme in this interview, is that inclusion aspect and that welcoming aspect. I filled in for David at a number of gigs over the last year and learned so much from David. He wrote me a long email once, "this is how I work beginners' night at the Greenfield dance." Let me tell you, I've used that syllabus now numerous times when working with rank beginners, he just had this brilliant way that was not a lot of talking but a whole lot of moving to the music, instantly gets people ready for an evening of contra dancing. He's a genius of looking at a group of people and not saying oh, this is gonna be hard calling with these beginners here. No, it's like, this is gonna be great.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Andy Davis**

I really hold David in huge regard for having that instinct.

**Julie Vallimont**

And the spirit of like, let's do this together!

**Andy Davis**

I wonder sometimes how many tunes that he didn't really think were great ideas that I suggested when playing with the Greenfield dance were always responded with "Great idea!" But I think he really meant it because if the band or the lead musician who he's hired to come down wants to play that tune. Let's do it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Let's do it. Yeah, he'll try it, absolutely.

**Andy Davis**

Anyway, what else you want to cover?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I'm curious to talk to you about... I think it's fun having people who have that dual perspective of being a caller and also a musician and really understanding how the dance and the music fit together. You also have the perspective of, like you say, of seeing the way that we dance change. You talked about Randy and Rodney and house bands and house callers and how a lot of that has changed. How did becoming a caller change you as a musician, or vice versa?

**Andy Davis**

Well, that is a really wonderful question. I was a musician first and I have sometimes had great respect for people attempting to become callers who are not musicians. Because I always felt like I was a musician first, and a caller is a musician. A caller feels the music deeply, to me, it's all about anticipating the rolling of one phrase into another. It's those turnarounds that are so important, and those turnarounds, I will say, have also changed in contra dance music. I'd love to comment on that, but to a caller it's all about anticipating the beginning of the next phrase and using an appropriate amount of words to cue the dancers. Sometimes with beginners, it's good to mention the who before the what. If you mention the what first and then the who, they're not sure what the what was and now it's too late to find the who. But if you say "face your corner, do-si-do," they're more likely to do-si-do than if you say "do-si-do the one below," which is a great call, one I got from Ralph Page, I think. I love that we used to say that when we had actives and inactives, we don't talk about the one below much anymore. But that was for people that knew how to contra dance. I would say that what being a musician did was, I had never any trouble knowing when the next beginning of phrase was coming, I felt that in my bones and could easily... in our books I talk about the eight beat cue, stop right there all join hands, all now forward and back. If you want them to go forward on the on the one, give them all that. But once they know what they're doing, chop it down, turn to the middle, go forward and back or into the middle and it just sort of slowly begins to disappear as you shorten your calls. But you have to sort of know where that last beat is before you want them to take off and initiate that motion. For me, it went from being a musician to being a caller. When I see people calling who aren't musicians, I think that's a big part of the job is you've got to learn the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

You've got to feel it in your body.

**Andy Davis**

You've got to feel it, you've got to dance all by yourself in your kitchen many times. One thing I learned from Larry Edelman—I'm doing a lot of name dropping here but it's not to prove that I know all these people but I just feel like I've learned this tradition from other people. I've got a whole bookshelf I never look at, everything I actually use I learned from somebody and Larry, at a caller's workshop at Pinewoods one time said "You got to know your calls as well as you know the alphabet." And it's so true. You can't be fumbling for words. You got to know exactly what you're going to say.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's just like knowing the tune really well, then you can start to get inside it and play with it.

**Andy Davis**

I recommend people listen, get the old tapes of Ralph Page. Ralph was a singing contra dance caller. People often think of singing square dances and then contras are called a different way. Ralph Page sang! [sings] "Cast off, now down the center, forward and back." He was singing in tune with the band, and when they changed keys, he changed keys and he was singing. I love that, I love that intoned calling where the caller is part of the band. When I got started, I was really interested in the music and I had to get a little bit pulled onto the dance floor. I mean, that's the other thing: you've talked about caller, musician... you have to dance. You may not spend as much of your life doing it if you're a caller and musician because you're always on stage. But you've got to be comfortable on the dance floor to be a good caller or a dance musician. You got to know what it feels like on the floor. I think they all work together, being a dancer, you don't have to be a great dancer, but you just gotta get it on the floor.

**Julie Vallimont**

So when you're playing for a dance and you're watching the floor, what are the things that you are watching for, what are the things you're thinking and paying attention to? Or are you just having a good time? I mean, the answer could be nothing.

**Andy Davis**

I'm pretty much having a good time, but I think it's watching. It's really, what I was going to say about phrasing is that I feel as an accompanist, we used to do more, and this is what I learned from listening to the early piano players that were influential for me. Phrases seemed to come to an end. [Makes 8 bars of rhythm noises.] And then we start a new one. [Makes 8 bars of rhythm noises.] Now, whoever invented sustained chords realized that you do not have to go from V to I. You can go [Makes more than 8 bars of rhythm noises] and never resolving, even though the fiddle tune goes [sings the end of a tune] but the piano doesn't have to go [sings V and I], the piano can go [sings V, then other sounds]. There's a lot more glomming the end of ...... are you relating to what I'm saying here?

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Andy Davis**

When I first heard people starting to do that, I thought, that's interesting, because that's not really in the tune. The tune very clearly works out moving from V to I, but it doesn't have to be accompanied that way.

**Julie Vallimont**

It doesn't have to, and that was one of the first questions I asked people when I was learning is, like, if the tune goes back to I but it's kind of near the end of the B2, that move hasn't completed until you get to the beginning of the A1 and so I was like, do I have to resolve? Or even people on the melody might play like that classic French Canadian ending [sings]. They might go [sings a longer phrase]. That's all V [sings the phrase again]. So you were talking about sus chords, like suspended chords as some tool that you use and also like a dominant chord, like a V chord is a way to add that drama and continue the phrase over to the next section of the tune.

**Andy Davis**

I think it was Greenfield Dance Band, Mary Cay Brass, really kind of did that heavily, or dropping out and having melody only and having the piano come in with this big extended feeling of unsettled impending crash, and then the big balance and swing your neighbor. You know, that book, Zesty Contras by that wonderful man from Boston, who did that beautiful collection.

**Julie Vallimont**

Larry Jennings?

**Andy Davis**

Larry Jennings. I think it was in his second book he used to use an exclamation point for when something surprising happened. He had that wonderful set of symbols in his books for putting whole dances in in very little space. I think it was his second book, he had some new dance and it had Ladies Chain over and Ladies Chain back and he put an exclamation point and that said all I needed to know about how things have changed.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because that was shocking.

**Andy Davis**

In the '70s, if you chained over, you chain back, you never chained over and then never saw them again. That's not fair. But the only reason I bring that up is that the choreography also became more... less resolved at the end of each phrase. It didn't like... we do an eight, an eight-beat figure and then we start another one, and it's like you flow, and then if a hey ends with what I call now a no-hand swing—that's my preferred terminology for a gypsy, not a no-hand swing, a no-hand turn. Because you're essentially turning with the person without hands. I call it a no-hand turn. If you do a hey into a no-hand turn into a swing, that hey doesn't have to end it. There's nothing definite about where that hey ends, because it's just going into another indefinite thing, into another unpunctuated thing called the swing. So a lot of the music has become more cross-phrased because the choreography became more cross-phrased.

**Julie Vallimont**

Which I think supports tunes like Irish tunes which often have longer windier phrases to them.

**Andy Davis**

One of my favorite things to do, though, and I don't do it nearly enough in New England, but when I was down in North Carolina last summer and calling at a little house party, I love calling, forget the phrases, just watch what's happening on the dance floor, and you just call to make it the most exciting. Wherever people are getting back to their partner, that's when they swing, not the beginning of some abstraction called the next phrase. That's fun, to just be out there dancing and just do it as fast as you can and everybody's rocking around and you're not calling to the phrase at all. You're calling to the beat. That's the most exciting calling there is, because not only are the dancers not sure what's happening, the caller is not sure what's happening next.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you're just living in the moment. Will Mentor does a lot of hash calling, he calls it.

**Andy Davis**

I really enjoy that. But I think that contra has sort of brought some of that element into it, even though the roots of New England are very chunky New England, what I would call very Yankee chunky. Right and left through, right and left back. That's a very chunky figure, and then balance your partner or pass or I don't know. They were in these 8, 8, 8, 8, 8, 8. And now the music has broken through the phrase, the choreography has broken through the phrase, and the roots of that are still there. I don't think I can say anything else about that, but I noticed that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's interesting to think about the time when it was scandalous to chain and then not chain back, and now it would be scandalous to chain over and back. Like why did we just do that?

**Andy Davis**

That exclamation... "Warning!" I like to joke with folks when I introduce the terminology "improper set" and I say it used to be so much easier to offend people. That crossing the gents over, the gents and ladies, the actives crossed over. Ooh, improper.

**Julie Vallimont**

Crazy.

**Andy Davis**

It's so hard to shock people nowadays. But I have noticed that change in things to the point where sometimes....... I haven't been to NEFFA for a long time but the last time I was there at one of those huge mass dances, I tell you, I could not hear the band, I could not really hear the caller. I had no idea whether I was in the A section of the tune or the D section of the tune. I was just trying to keep my head above water on the dance floor. That was very different from what got me started in this.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was that because of the sound, just the difficulty in a big gymnasium?

**Andy Davis**

The sound system was contributing to this level of excitement.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, it's hard to have a dance at a giant school gym. It's a different animal, right? Like you say from these small town halls that have good acoustics and a beautiful sprung wood floor.

**Andy Davis**

I'm not a dance historian at all, I'm a very amateur dance historian, but think... so many of the duple dances that we do now, ones and twos, were ones, twos, and threes, and they were kicked up to duples because people found triples to be too much. You know, you had to wait too long to be inactive. We don't really have actives and inactives anymore. All the newer dances, everybody's active, doesn't matter where you start the dance. I remember one year I was at Ashokan, quite a bit younger, and it was Northern week and the Québécois music was just raging. I was in a step dance class as part of my day. A guy was teaching how to step dance at a dance. I realized very few contra dances any more give you any time to dance. You're so busy trying to get to the next point. I love the squares, because when you weren't active, you had no other choice but to dance, to step dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you're doing clogging steps, or...

**Andy Davis**

To keep your feet moving, clog. If you're inactive in a contra, and it's actives balance and swing, you don't need to cheat and change the choreography, you can dance. That's something I'd love to see come back, that people get a little more into the solo dance, like being a dancer with their feet and using those times of so called inactivity, not as oh, I have nothing to do. But oh, here's an opportunity for me to dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

On my favorite things, as a musician is sitting on stage and watching people when they come out at the top, and they have that 30 seconds to wait. And they're clogging or flat footing, whatever they know, or they make it up.

**Andy Davis**

Or they might clap to the music, or off beats, or something.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love that.

**Andy Davis**

But then they came into, we are in love with activity. So you get into some modern contras where you have to deal with, what do you call them, end effects? How to dance through the end of the dance, instead of, hey, don't I get my 30 seconds of rest up here? No, I got to keep my brain turned on even rounding the corner. I don't want to sound too curmudgeonly here, but that never happened back in the 80s.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, it's a different kind of experience. In that kind of dancing, I think it all goes together, like you're saying, people want to be moving constantly. They want dances that feel like they have a flow and progression. They don't need time to talk to people and they also want music that's exciting and dramatic and those things all go together.

**Andy Davis**

Yeah, that's true.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it's not for everyone. It's wonderful, and there's a lot of different branches to the evolutionary tree, if we're gonna use that metaphor again, you know?

**Andy Davis**

Well, one thing I do love is that sometimes it's easy to think as part of a member of an organization—and my wife and I are members of CDSS and just spent lots of time and in cultivating that organization—it's sometimes easy to think that the dance community is the carrier of the flame. The dance community plays a role in that. But I really do believe that the New England dance culture is bigger than the dance community. Again, as I talked about earlier, calling dances at weddings and parties and even here in this area, it's one of the things I think is a little unfortunate that some of the local square dance traditions are very separate from the contra dance world. You have to go out of your way to go to one of the local square dances, but when someone falls off a roof up in the West River Valley and they have a fundraiser, and they get [the] Bills Band to come down from Wardsboro and play a square dance fundraiser at the Dover Town Hall, none of those folks are contra dancers. But they've been dancing their whole lives, and they're part of the country dance culture of New England. So many summer camps that have their once or twice a summer, big night of the live caller and band and people view that as part of their summer camp experience growing up. They're part of the New England dance culture. Have you ever been to a Northeast Fiddler's Association meeting? There's a whole bunch of people that you will never see at a contra dance, that their big deal is playing dance tunes. It's kind of a big mishmash of bluegrass and New England and jigs and reels and Québécois, whatever you want to play, but it's almost like going into a fiddle contest. It's where it's not so oriented toward the dance, but it's people that love playing dance music but they're not part of what we would call the contra dance scene. But I still consider that all part of the big vital heritage of northeast dance music.

**Julie Vallimont**

At its best, a tradition like this is part of the fabric of people's everyday lives. When you get married, when you build a barn, when you need help.

**Andy Davis**

The old home days. We've gotten so much work over the years where some little town in New Hampshire calls you up and, "we're having our old home days. Can you come up and call the dance for us?" You get a couple of friends and you go up to some little tiny town under a tent, or on the back of a flatbed truck in the middle of Main Street, and you call the dance. And they're darn easy dances. But, it's a highlight.

**Julie Vallimont**

And to keep that tradition alive you need to have callers and musicians who nurture it. Because they have to hire someone to show them how to do it and you have to cultivate that kind of mentality that makes it good to work with beginners. That's that very welcoming, doesn't matter if you do it right, come on up here, and let's all dance together, or hey, come on up and play your tambourine with us. Cultivating that kind of mentality, that's just as important as having a dance box full of 1000 dance cards of all the coolest new dances with all sorts of weird progressions and everything else. You know, it's a different specialty and I think it's one that parts of the contra dance scene.... I think it's easy to kind of look down and like oh I'm just playing for a beginners dance. We have to remember the excitement and joy that's the lifeblood of this.

**Andy Davis**

Well, you think also, you know, if you believe there is a future to this, that it has to be multi-generational. That's why there's such rich things going on here in Vermont and elsewhere. When I look at what [Pete Sutherland and Mark Sustic with the Young Traditions](https://youngtraditionvermont.org/) up in the Burlington area have done, and we have an outpost of that here. I like to think of so many music teachers who we wouldn't think of as being part of the dance community who are doing the...you know, we sell through New England Dancing Masters thousands of books and recordings a year all over the country and the world. I'm not saying that every one of those teachers is expert at it. But they are bringing the joy of community dance into their community, into their classroom, into their school. We get so many emails from people that say, I have all of your books, I use them every day, my children love to dance and I think you're just as much a part of the dance crowd as anybody else. Without that multigenerational thing, who's going to come in? Who's going to go, "oh, I had so much fun doing this in school I decided to introduce it at my college." "I found a local musician or my roommate happened to play the fiddle so we started a dance at the college." That's how it's gonna happen. Because it's like you were talking about evolution, it's not going to happen because these particular dances last for the next 500 years. Things are gonna change and flow, and these dances will not survive, but new people in other places will plug into that fire that's traditional dance and music.

**Julie Vallimont**

You were talking about that theory that Arthur mentioned about geology, and I forget the exact phrasing of it, but it reminded me of Stephen Jay Gould's theory of punctuated equilibrium.

**Andy Davis**

That's cool, that ought to be a song.

**Julie Vallimont**

These don't happen always slowly and gradually, you know, change doesn't always happen slowly and gradually.

**Andy Davis**

Disruption followed by adaptation.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. That was Arthur's thing and it's the same kind of thing. Like, sometimes all it takes is one big change and things change and we're in the middle of something, we don't know what it's gonna be.

**Andy Davis**

Well see, here's the little change that happened right in the '70s. I moved to New England right at the end of the back-to-the-land movement. The Nearings in the 50s...a lot of communes here in Southern Vermont. There were a lot of people coming to rural New England from Boston and New York and Philadelphia, Washington, to rural America to try to find a different, saner human family. I will say that the vestiges of the square dance community were not all positive in New England. I remember when Chris Madigan and the Little Band, we wanted to start up the dance in Acworth because there had been a dance there, but the selectboard was not interested. Because those dances, there had been fights and there'd been too much drinking and they didn't want them. They were noisy, people misbehaved. I remember listening in on the other end on the phone while Chris talked to the selectboard and he was saying, "we're not a drinking group, we won't disrupt the neighborhood," and they gave us a chance and we proved them right. I remember a caller once telling me, he happened to have David Woodsfellow, who was one of the founders of Applejack, which was almost like a collective. They'd take five jobs on the same night, hire all their friends and do all five jobs. And David Woodsfellow had a long ponytail. He told me that the first dance he went to in New England, when he do-si-doed another guy that called the gents do-si-do, he was kind of clearly a hippie from somewhere else, and the guy he do-si-doed with yanked his ponytail to be funny. The older square dances, and there were still square dance clubs around here when I started doing this, there was the Green Mountain Squares and the Maple Squares, Maple Sugar Squares or something like that. And they were still calling with, you paid with your partner, they were club dances with phonographs, those groups have pretty much stopped. That would be a good project to interview some of the older dancers right here in Windham County. Because those folks are still around, who've spent their whole life dancing, have never been part of the contra dance scene but they're still here.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I remember going to [Ralph Sweet's Powder Mill Barn](https://historicbuildingsct.com/powder-hollow-barn-1845/) and just... square dance pennants all over the barn, and it's like a bygone era in a way.

**Andy Davis**

There's [East Hill Farm](https://east-hill-farm.com/dance-weekends-and-midweek/). Have you ever played with Randy Miller over at East Hill Farm? That's where Ralph Page used to do his big square dance weekends, and they still have the banners up for the different square dance clubs. We still do the dance in the dining hall there, and it's not that big a place, but that was a big square dance node of activity and the owners still have dances like at Thanksgiving and Christmas. We go over there and it's like a little informal family dance. But at one time that was like the best square dancers in the Monadnock region went down to East Hill Farm, and that was the happening place.

**Julie Vallimont**

Now squares are funny because sometimes they're like, super hip, like, in DC area. They've had ones that brought hundreds of dancers and they're being revitalized. But then also there's contra dancers who notoriously will just sit out for the square if a caller tries to do it, they will get met with excitement and also skepticism. It's just an interesting thing. We've had like the singing squares kind of revival and all these different things.

**Andy Davis**

I just hope it all survives so that as life goes on, people can continue, because we do live in this age where everything is so beautifully documented. It's no longer just an oral tradition. This stuff is videoed, it's documented in writing. So someone could come along in 100 years, and discover something that hadn't been done in a long time and pull it back together.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sometimes we lose things from our tradition, just kind of by accident, we don't mean to stop doing them. We just stop and we move on to other things and even if the tradition continues unbroken, we can always go back to the past and say, oh, that thing that we used to do was really cool, let's bring back more of that and oh, this new thing we tried that was fun for a while, and now let's do something else, or whatever.

**Andy Davis**

So many families, they do continue to pass it on to their children. I always find that you don't have to grow up in a folk family to discover the fun of folk dance and folk song. I love it when we have the pub sing here in Brattleboro and somebody's sitting at the bar who did not come for the pub sing, they just came for the bar. When they hear everybody singing they stand up and say, "I have a song my dad used to sing." That's like the crowning achievement of the pub sing. I feel it's similar when somebody stumbles into a dance because they were having dinner across the street. Someone told me that story. Oh, it was the guy who's no longer with us who started the Star Island Weekend. I heard the story about how he got into contra dancing. They were having dinner with friends and there was a dance happening across the street and they just went over to show him what contra dancing was and he ended up becoming this great organizer, true believer, loved contra dance. I mean, you never know who is going to pick up that bug. They don't have to be born with it. They just have to see what it is as this kind of magical thing, that with some instruments and goodwill and friendship, it's just waiting to be unfolded. I never worry that it's not going to keep happening. It's too good a thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's too good a thing. Well, thank you, Andy, so much, and it's been so fun to talk to you. I really appreciate it.

**Andy Davis**

Oh, I feel like I found a bit of a of a soulmate in terms of our view. I can just see your face lighting up on some of the things that I think are true for everybody, whether you're in the fast lane today or you're longing for the simpler, older times, still the fundamental thing of this is darn fun. It's totally a constant. It's like the something in physics, what's that thing in physics? There's a something constant. [There are several constants in physics — Andy probably meant Planck's constant.]

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know. Well, thank you so much.

**Andy Davis**

Thank you, I really appreciate you doing this. I know you started it before the COVID, but I really do think it's a time for us to read these things and listen to them. And for people that are newer at it, I hope some of the newer folks who have been at it for less than 10 years will listen to some of these interviews. Because there's a lot of history there. Some of it in agreement, some of it showing different sides that, in totality, show so many aspects of what's made this vital.

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