Contra Pulse Episode 19: Pete Sutherland Part I

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra Pulse, this is Julie Vallimont. Today we speak with Vermont musical legend Pete Sutherland. A warm-voiced singer-songsmith and accomplished multi-instrumentalist Pete plays fiddle, Piano, Banjo, Melodica and much more for contra dances with his current contra band Pete’s Posse and is a founding member of the long-running 'contradance jam band' The Clayfoot Strutters.

While his music has powered thousands of dancers from Kodiak to Costa Rica, Pete is also perhaps the only old time fiddler whose original compositions have been heard on both "Car Talk" and "Hearts of Space". Pete is a veteran of many touring and recording groups including Metamora, Rhythm in Shoes, The Woodshed Allstars, Wood’s Tea Company, and Ira Bernstein’s Ten Toe Percussion. A Renaissance man of the folk arts, Pete is also a producer with over 80 projects under his belt, and a prolific songwriter covered by the likes of Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer, Jay Ungar and Molly Mason, Nightingale, Altan.

Pete has served as artistic director for a number of groups including the Champlain Valley Festival, and most recently for the Young Tradition VT. He has been on staff at dance and music camps coast-to-coast and is a widely-known year-round teacher and performer at home.

Pete and I had so much fun talking that our interview is in two parts. In the first half he talks about his musical roots, how he got started playing for contra dances, and what the scene was like in the early 70s. And we got into how he teaches music theory and other topics. In the second half we talk about what makes good dance music, how drums changed his approach to dance playing, the difference between playing in large bands and small bands, and we explored what it means to respect tradition without being strict traditionalist. Hope you enjoy!

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello, Pete Sutherland. Welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Pete Sutherland**

Thank you. Good to be with you. Yes, we're as with each other as we can be right now via the magic of the internet. How's things been in your corner of Vermont lately? So I spent about three weeks being kind of paralyzed about transitioning into teaching online—I teach anyway, quite a bit. I'll be happy to talk a lot more about that. Because it's really, in a way, the gravitational center for my own mental health and my own sense of purpose.

**Julie Vallimont**

You have these really deep connections in Vermont with the community and being involved with [Young Tradition](https://youngtraditionvermont.org/) for so many years, and like, literally generations of musicians. I think about like Oliver [Scanlon], who now you play in a band with, and you travel around with and it's really, really cool.

**Pete Sutherland**

Oliver Scanlon we're talking about, and he's probably the guy that's taught me the most about mentoring. I was never really his formal teacher, but he's been a protégé of mine in all kinds of different programs over the years, and in fact, is not only as you said, just become a colleague, but he's on two different board of directors with me, and he's taken over the reins with the Young Tradition Vermont touring group, which is based up here in Burlington. I'm kind of his senior advisor person. So it was kind of a one-year transition over, but he's really doing great with that and some of the people that he's been advising are already showing signs of being able to follow that path, as well. It's definitely... it's unbelievably gratifying to have started those wheels turning and have them turning almost on their own at this point. I mean, they're not really, but it feels like if I stopped pushing the wagon or the '57 Chevy, or whatever it is I've been pushing, it'll just keep rolling fine and just kind of go on its own. It's just a great thing to look for, really.

But I was born here in Burlington, and I have lived other places, and I came back 30 years ago. I've lived most of the eras of my musical life, which has been my entire adult life, right here, except for the '80s when I was in Indiana, playing with a group called [Metamora](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_-iyXFzEMs&list=OLAK5uy_nHWtiMFyH5zAnsQ3Fe3rbr9lywsyIyzJs&index=1), Malcolm Dalglish and Grey Larsen. So I was based in Indiana then, but otherwise, I've been here. And so you just keep doing whatever it is you've hung out your shingle saying that you can do, for a long time, and then people just keep coming. You get referrals, and you get calls from complete strangers about this or that, and you get emails about using this particular tune of yours in this way, and it's just such a grab bag of happy fallout, the whole thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

How did you get started playing fiddle, and how did you get started playing for contra dances? I realized that's something I don't know about you.

**Pete Sutherland**

I did not grow up with any of this music, so, I heard some bluegrass in high school and then in college, and I got a banjo first, and I was kind of messing around with that for about a year. And then the fiddle that was on some of the recordings, both old time and bluegrass, was starting to grab me. Coincidentally, my granddad gave me a fiddle that was not working at the time that had to be glued back together. My brother's girlfriend gave me a fiddle that was working, because they were about to hitchhike to California to join a commune. You can date this event pretty well. A little bit post-Woodstock, so '71, something like that, and I was like, this is really great. And then within about a half year, I met a bunch of people that were similarly inclined, and everybody was just trying to figure it out. It was really nice to have everybody trying to figure it out as a group. I was still going to the University of Vermont, in Burlington. So by the time I was a senior, we had this very ragtag string band put together and I was playing square and contra dances there. Similarly, we were just kind of making up... we really didn't know how it was supposed to work. Somebody had been to a Dudley Laufman dance in New Hampshire once, and somebody else grew up square dancing with singing squares, and somebody else had been here or there, and so it was just a stone soup of information that we were trying to put together, and then we were just reading calls and tunes out of books. We were on our own little desert island up here, not connected with the contra dance revival that might have been already happening in Southern New Hampshire, in Boston, and Maine.

This is like, way before... I guess Pinewoods was probably going, I'm not sure [it was], I didn't know about it. It was way before CDSS being a networking thing. It was way before Greenfield, Peterborough... it was kind of the end of the old era, I think. We didn't really know much about any of that stuff, we just like, wanted to play tunes, and it was great if people could figure out some organized way to dance to the music as we were trying to learn. So that paints you a bit of a picture, probably. We were just amazed that we could make anything happen. And a lot of the folks that were making it happen with us were international folk dancers, because there was a pretty active club going at the University of Vermont. They had a good sensibility about it, they could count to eight and clap on the beat and step on the beat. And most of them knew a ballroom swing. And so, we weren't starting from absolute zero, but people hadn't necessarily actually done contra dancing or anything like that. It was just some intuitive ability to that. My very first string band when I was just scratching away on the fiddle—really, I had no business, I knew some tunes but I was so terrible and I had no business getting up there. Luckily, one of my friends who was a mandolin player had a pal in town who was a violin player, went on to be a very good violin builder. She was really taken with fiddle music, she sounded exactly like a violin player, playing fiddle music and you know, we've all heard that. But somehow when you put her together with me, it sounded somewhat like fiddling. I had the attitude and she had the tone.

That lasted for a while, and we had a guitar player who could keep a beat and, you know, the minimum requirements. So we were serviceable in that way. That is a band that eventually sort of winnowed out, it was a drop-in situation, all kinds of ne'er-do-well hippies with backpacks came through with their mandolins or whatever, their banjos, and joined us on the spot, and then we never saw them again. It kind of shook down to an actual band with about five people in it. We started getting invited to play some of the local bluegrass festivals because we were this weird oddity of people playing old time music that everybody thought was charming. We were also interested in Irish music and Québécois music, of course, because we're only 30 minutes from the border here. So that's a thing up here, strong thread. There's a lot more to say about that part of my life as well, of course, so we were trying to intake all of it and somehow reproduce all of it and so it was, in a way, exactly what a lot of contra dance bands have ended up presenting on the bandstand, right? A smorgasbord. Even if they're writing their own music, all those influences are pretty evident.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's kind of the standard.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, it's a standard. Unless they became specialists early on and just said "it's gonna be Irish music or nothing."

**Julie Vallimont**

So you started your first contras and square dances, and then none of you really knew what you were doing and you probably had some fun with that. Did that make you want to seek out... like somehow you ended up playing in a contra band mega group for 30 years, so how did that all...maybe 25... like Clayfoot Strutters? How did that evolution happen?

**Pete Sutherland**

That happened when I moved back to Vermont, in 1989, from Indiana, from the sojourn I had out there for about seven years playing with Metamora, which was a concert band, it was not a dance band. It was a touring concert band and I really missed playing for dances. And I did play at the Wednesday night dance in Bloomington, which is the oldest contra dance in the Midwest, had been going since I think 1970. [Since 1972.] I moved out there at the end of '82 to work with these guys. And so at least we were home, we were not on the road on Wednesday, I got to hang out there and dance and play, and every Wednesday night was a freebie, for one thing: nobody ever got paid. It was pickup band after pickup band after pickup band, and most of us know that Bloomington is one of those bright lights out there in the map, college town, and partly because you can get a PhD in folklore there. So a lot of pretty skilled musicians who are aiming at an academic career end up there to do that. And then they come down to the dance and have a good time, some nice social occasion away from hitting the books for them. So amazing talent has always been there and been part of that scene. So I was part of that scene while I was there but that's the only dance playing, pretty much, that I did that decade. It kind of kept my hand in the game, kept me learning tunes, get my appetite whetted.

In a way, the answer to your question is, it's kind of decade by decade. So the '70s were the string band, it was called the Arm and Hammer String Band by the way, which was born at UVM and played around and then disbanded in '79. I just was doing various things with my wife around, including just playing for dances, just fiddle and piano, which is great, two-person band and other kinds of gigs, and then this opportunity to go out and hit the road for the first time in a big way with these Bloomingtonians, who were pretty well known already, and then that ended in about '89, and I moved back to Vermont. It was that week, actually, the very week I was still unpacking, that Jeremiah McLane and Lee Blackwell called me up and said, we just heard you're back in town...you want to get together and just kind of jam? They had been playing, just really the complete history here, they had been playing some in a kind of proto... drums, bass, big band version of Irish band called Celtic Menace, which played the local dances didn't go anywhere. Jamie Gans was the fiddler who lives now in Bloomington, good Irish player, and Sam Bartlett. Everybody's favorite bandmate who is from Vermont, he and I are actually from the same hometown here in Vermont. He was an early Clayfoot Strutter when he was around as well.

A lot of other people come and went. We literally got together amidst my unpacked boxes in my house in Fairfax, Vermont in the fall of '89 and had some of our first experiences that became part of the web of sound that the Clayfoot Strutters eventually wove, including getting together with this lovely Ethiopian musician named Seleshe Damassae who I was introduced to by my brother. He came over and he probably made it to four or five rehearsals and did a couple of gigs with us and taught us a whole bunch of traditional and a few original Ethiopian tunes that were just such a watershed for us too and pretty much launched the Strutters on the path of looking at all kinds of world musics as source material. So the big touchstones of the early days of the Strutters were drums and bass, [as] a backline behind fiddle, accordion and flute and whatever. And then this mini-immersion in East African music, and later some Sub-Saharan music because we were all really listening really avidly to a lot of that music from Mali... Tinariwen, and music from Zimbabwe... Thomas Mapfumo, and South African music, and we would just put this stuff on while we were cooking burritos together at a rehearsal. You know, like, "check this out, check this out." So it was just becoming this part of our heartbeat, pretty much, from the get-go on top of some other things that all of us were already engaged in, like zydeco or swing or something. That's kind of like the early Strutter soup making in in a nutshell, I guess.

**Julie Vallimont**

So who were the founding members of the band at that time?

**Pete Sutherland**

We could say clearly that Jeremiah, Lee and myself were the three founders, and other people came and went again, as happens when you haven't got a gig yet. The earliest one that stayed was Chris Layer. I don't know if you know him, but he's gone on to, Chris, piper, flute player. It turned out he had played bass in rock bands, a sort of a glitzy rock band in high school. He's a very good bass player. So he was our bass player, and occasionally we'd let him play flute or pipes or something. I'd met him in Indiana when he was a kid at a La Bottine Souriante concert, and we had stayed in touch and he followed me east. He ended up moving east just a couple months after I did and called me up and said, "I'm waving at you, I'm right across the lake." and he had gotten a job at Fort Ticonderoga as the musical guide historian/piper there, and so he stayed at that job for two or three years and played with us all that time. And then he moved to New York City and then he got involved with Trinity Irish Dance Company, and toured the world for a long time, and did a lot of other things. We went through a lot of bass players after that, I can't even really count them all. But a lot of them for a short time and some of them for a long time.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm imagining all the obvious bass player jokes.

**Pete Sutherland**

Well, it's almost like "Spinal Tap" and the drummers, but it's just the way it works. A good bass player is worth their weight in gold, as we all know. So it's likelier that they just had too many gigs, and they couldn't make a commitment. But we were joined very happily in our mid years by David Grant, Dave Grant, from Charlottesville, Virginia, who was playing all kinds of music down there with fusion bands. I knew him from old time music, but he is on [our one CD that we ever made, called "Going Elsewhere,"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDuQhdtU4DA&list=OLAK5uy_lhHqhhpXaPwylEe1S7sxcKtREggvb9e5M) and between the time that we recorded it, and the time we had to mix it, he was unfortunately killed in a work accident, which was just an unfathomable loss to all the music communities that he was part of. We had gigs on the books and Peter Davis, who was one of the people that we'd added on, Mark Roberts being the other who are now the long-term add-ons from the early years, both multi-instrumentalists, it's an all-star band. It's an amazing bunch of folks. Not to denigrate all the other people that have been in the band, but those are the long timers. Peter just said, "oh, I'll call up my friend, Harry Aceto." Harry was able to join on very short notice—this was, like, while we were sitting down to mix the album, like two days after David's death and burning a candle on the desk, and feeling all of that, and also looking at our calendar going, shit. We have like, three dance weekends in the next month, what are we going to do? So Harry said, yeah, I can do it. He's been with us ever since, which is amazing, just the consummate bass player. So that was 2002, I think, something like that. My years kind of run together, but somewhere right in there. So the Strutters exist if somebody offers us the gig, it's one of those bands now. But it hasn't actually worked in about two years. So, you know how that goes. I mean, nobody's working now.

**Julie Vallimont**

For the last year, nothing's happened. I imagine the Strutters would end up at festivals or dance weekends that have the budget to bring in a bunch of musicians from all over the place.

**Pete Sutherland**

Exactly. Because, we were a minimum of five people. We really preferred to be six or seven, and we were as many as nine. You're correct. People have those kind of bucks. Falcon Ridge Folk Festival, that was kind of our... if we're gonna play one gig this year, that's it. We had our own illegal camp out in back of the dance stage, with a couple of Teardrop trailers and tarps, and it was called Utarpia, and attempted to have jam sessions there when there was a lull in the action, and stuff like that. Falcon Ridge had a budget for that, and we'd play Old Songs [Festival] and some dance weekends.

**Julie Vallimont**

I've seen you at the Dance Flurry.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, the Flurry. Never too many gigs. George Marshall was really good at getting us on the road to do a week, going down to Washington or Richmond and back... he always knows how to put those tours together. So he was kind of responsible for putting us on the road at all, we probably wouldn't have been able to get that together. For the same reason, I mean, we just put a bunch of people in a band that are already possibly in two other working bands, or at least really busy, and it's kind of a rabbit hole. I've been very happy a good portion of this last decade to be in just one band, [Pete's Posse](https://www.petesposse.com/), that was created for the purpose of being "the" band for everybody in it. It was like "the" band, everybody's been in other bands that are on the side, but it's a gentleperson's agreement that this is like... you don't get in the way of the Posse with your calendar.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think a lot of dancers don't necessarily understand how and why contra bands come and go, there's a lot of different factors, life changes and personalities and location and things. But a lot of it is just everyone being able to commit to it the same amount at the same time and wanting the same things as each other. And often in a band that changes, one person has kids or another person goes to graduate school, and so I think it's great that you start a band where you all have the equal amount of commitment and desire to do it. I would say that Pete's Posse, you guys look like you've been pretty busy, so clearly it works.

**Pete Sutherland**

It works up until eight months ago when the start of nobody working live anyway. It was working just fine. I think we're about as successful as any band in whatever categories you want to put us in, in terms of staying active and actually making some significant bucks at it, through not only touring but recording, and other little side enterprises. So I'm proud of that. In the beginning it was trading on my name a bit because the other two guys were not so well known in either the concert world or the dance world. I have to add that we're talking about contra dance music, and that's how the Posse was born: as a contra dance, unit pretty informally, and then all of a sudden formally, but we were interested right from the get-go in singing and doing concert material.

So as we go back and sum up every calendar year and say, what percentage... it's interesting to us to crunch numbers. So what percentage were dance gigs and what percentage were concerts, it's always somewhat between 45 ,55 [percent], swinging one way or the other. That seems healthy to us. We would not want to do all one or all the other ever. If it gets too dance-oriented, we miss singing, because we've worked hard on arrangements, concert arrangements but the main thing is, it just kept us on the road more successfully. A lot of contra bands do house concerts and even sing. But I may be not aware of too many that have worked quite as diligently on developing an entirely different setlist for concerts. We don't really even play any of our dance sets straight up at all, when we do a concert, there's a lot of dance music or instrumental music, but it tends to be more adventurously composed/arrange[d], stretched out... reimagined, I guess might be a good word for it, more cinematic and that just feels like a gift to be able to do that. But we know how it works out commercially, we know how it works out, you go out on the road, and you can't play a dance every night. They ain't there, and besides, you'll to go broke. You'll go broke fast. You can make more money doing an average house concert than you can at a fairly decent dance. That's just the numbers, and so to be able to put together a tour with the best of both worlds...logic to that.

**Julie Vallimont**

If you want to be a full-time dance musician, it's very hard to then make a living to continue to be a full-time dance musician just playing dances, and so a lot of dance musicians do other things, they teach, they perform in concerts, they do other things. They have day jobs, they do all sorts of things. But I think there aren't that many bands who do it 50/50 with, like, almost equal love and attention to both. I feel like there are a lot of dance bands who sometimes play concerts and enjoy it. And then there are a lot of concert bands who sometimes play dances and enjoy it. But it's kind of neat that you guys, you do both with equal enthusiasm. I mean, some concert bands, they might talk down about their contra dance music, like it's not real music because it's not being played at a concert.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yes, slumming almost. Yeah, almost like they're slumming. Which is not a very decent attitude to even imply, much less state. Yeah, it's entirely by design that we ended up being able to live that way, to live that life or see that career. It was very conscious.

**Julie Vallimont**

So during all those years of the Clayfoot Strutters, before Pete's Posse came around, what other ways were you playing for dances besides your time with the Strutters?

**Pete Sutherland**

I was married for a long time and my wife is a very decent contra dance piano player. So like I said, fiddle and piano. I mean, what's wrong with that? You can portray a pretty solid trad New England sound that is still extremely serviceable, I still kind of enjoy it. I mean, I'm getting old and kind of, like, lazy about the entire prospect of being the only melody player for a three-hour dance. I couldn't do that anymore. My fingers would be literally numb by the end of the second hour, I think, so being in a band where I get to swap off playing backup and lead and have an incredibly capable, strong co-fiddle player is just the best, it's the best at this point. I really can't go back. I'll play a little gigs, I mean, as we're talking about what kind of gigs we do, we know very well that we're not doing any gigs, right? That's theoretical, but if you or I were doing a gig tomorrow, wouldn't that be fun? And it would be entirely possible that I would take a little gig that was like, [a] one-hour wedding gig and play some dances or something, or call for that matter. I used to call, so I can do that wedding calling thing. I can call the Virginia Reel, I call like, La Bastringue, I can do...they're all in my brain.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those are the best dances anyway, those are my favorites.

**Pete Sutherland**

Well, they make people happy, right? Yeah, exactly. When I was in Bloomington, my wife and I would occasionally go up to Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, which is a seven-hour round trip on a Thursday night, to play their little tiny contra dance, and probably make $150 and drive home, and she would go into school the next day, she was in the opera program at IU Bloomington, and I would get up and go back to the Metamora practice studio and hit it again and just have an extra cup of coffee. But distances in the Midwest are crazy for us Yankees. A "local gig," that's a "local gig," seven-hour round trip. Cincinnati, five-and-a-half-hour round trip from Bloomington. Totally local gig. Louisville, four hours. Whoa, that's right next door. Hop in the car, let's go.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's crazy, the things we do.

**Pete Sutherland**

That set me up well, Julie, when I came back to Vermont and I was looking for similar kind of things to do before the Strutters really got going. I was subbing in as one of the thousands of fiddlers that have played with Wild Asparagus, and so I would drive to Greenfield and play the gig and drive home, and that's for me a five-hour round trip from northern Vermont.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and that was easy for you at that point. That's just what you do.

**Pete Sutherland**

It was easier, because thank God there were rest stops, I could stop and take a nap. But it was like... those dances went till friggin' midnight. Luckily, Dunkin' Donuts was still open, so stop and get some coffee and some sugar, and then start driving, and I think I'd get to bed around five o'clock. I wouldn't do that anymore.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. Yeah, I'm too old for that now. We would drive from Boston to Montpelier [Vermont], play the Montpelier dance and come back home that night. Two and a half hours. Jeremiah's always all over the place. From Vermont, you know? Just do it.

**Pete Sutherland**

He doesn't live near anything, really.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was like, he has to drive everywhere to everything. All the time. I feel like for many musicians, I can ask them, "what is your philosophy about this various musical thing?" But you strike me as a person who has so many philosophies because you've done so many different things. You write songs, you work with schools, you've played in contra bands that sound traditional and contra bands that sound new, and I feel like Pete's Posse always has a sense of mischief up on stage, where you're always up to something. So I don't know what the right question is to ask you to get you to talk about all that stuff. And you've also produced 80 albums, something like that. So you just have so many different musical perspectives. And of course, you produced the Nor'easter album, which was the first time I really got to know you... little baby Julie learning to play contra piano.

**Pete Sutherland**

I remember that, I remember doing a little retreat with you guys at Middlebury College, actually. We did part of our thing there, where I've been working for a number of years teaching. You're right, I don't think I have one guiding philosophy, except that I'm kind of open, and I sometimes get away with calling myself a general practitioner of music, of folk music anyway, GP, and what the heck is that? I love trad music ever since I first set ears on it back in college and have never stopped, and I've also loved a lot of other kinds of music that definitely have you coloring outside the lines all the time, or there aren't any lines. I was in a rock band in high school, we skipped over that part. I was writing songs, I was singing in glee club in high school. I was composing and songwriting, and in college I was way into still the Beatles and some of the folk revival acts, and Joni Mitchell and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young and Incredible String Band and Donovan and some of the Woodstock Festival artists and it was just top to bottom in the pop world with a little bit more ear towards the acoustic rock or acoustic pop. It was just like, all rock and roll to me. I had this year where I was trying to learn to play the fiddle and I was still listening to Led Zeppelin avidly. I was also listening to Tommy Jarrell and Fred Cockerham avidly. If that doesn't sum up something about my crazy brain, I don't know. Because I still feel like that guy. Really.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, when you sit down at your Yamaha keyboard, and you play the organs during a Pete's Posse contra dance, I kind of know what you're channeling there Pete.

**Pete Sutherland**

I'm right back there in high school. I've never learned to be a better piano player... that was probably the high point for me. I took piano when I was little and I stopped when I was not having fun anymore. So five years. So I never got really technically any good, but high school, I realized I could play by ear. So that got me in the door to playing with my neighbors in a rock band. Also I had a great year for figuring out chords... so it'd be like, [someone would ask me], what are the chords to this? And I could just [say], "give me a sharpie, and some paper, I'll tell you what they are." It makes you an MVP in any crowd if you can figure out the chords, and you tend to be the fastest gun in the West at doing so. Then people, they want you around. It's still true. A lot of my lessons are about theory now, and I'm really trying to always figure out a better way to teach applied theory. I feel like that's my life's work now. It's not really about teaching fiddle tunes, or banjo licks, or piano inversions. It's really about, how do you learn to integrate your left and right brain's abilities to really understand how to find your way around your instrument and use your ear and possibly use some kind of ID—I'm way off topic here—but some kind of identification system that works for you personally, in order to catalog all this stuff so that you can feel like you're building your own knowledge base, it isn't somebody else's that you're getting out of a book. And it's not because I told you, that, that you should think about it my way or anything like that. It's like, how do you really grok the landscape of music? It becomes this place that you can go over and over and feel at home and feel like, you know, boom, I've just jumped in the transporter, I beam down to planet music, and I know where I am exactly and it's on my terms. That's my goal. So now we're talking about teaching again, and I don't even remember what your question was.

**Julie Vallimont**

It doesn't matter. Let's stay here. I love that you used the word "grok," because that's from "Stranger in a Strange Land" [by Robert Heinlein]. That word, there's some words that you realize, "I've been wanting this word for my whole life," and to grok means to kind of like, internalize and understand something, like to "get it" in a way. And I just think that's such a great word for this kind of thing.

**Pete Sutherland**

Science fiction, man.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of science fiction is about creativity. And a lot of science fiction writers understand the creative process in their own way. It's a kind of fluency in music, it seems like what you're talking about, where being musically fluid, like, everyone's brains are different, but being able to hear chords pass by and know what chords they are, or know how they relate to each other, or know how they relate to the tune that's being played, I'm trying to make sure I understand, reflectively listening to what you're talking about. And what this applied theory really means.

**Pete Sutherland**

Some people are really proactively aware that that would enrich their entire experience, and they're hungry for it. And again, about 85% of my clientele, my teaching clientele are under the age of 16. So it's a little unusual, because a lot of kids are just like, "show me another great tune that I can just, like, shred." So you almost have to spoonfeed them, or sneak it in, and I am a pretty sneaky teacher. I'm a kind of a chucklehead, you know, I always find some kind of way to talk outside of the topic at hand, sort of like, be their, buddy, "how's it going?" And you know, "how about them Red Sox?" kind of thing, or, "tell me something that you really find frustrating about doing math on Zoom." It's worth five minutes of any lesson to get personable. And then it's a lot easier to sneak some theory in, and I'm even upfront about it. Sometimes I'll say like, "spoiler alert, in about two minutes, we're gonna spend about five minutes talking theory here. You can log off anytime." It just get some laughing about it, and then we just go for it. But there's a few kids that are like, yeah, that's really great, it's really helpful.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you talk theory, what does that look like?

**Pete Sutherland**

What does that look like? My God, we could take so long here on this. I try to make them articulate as much as possible, how they actually picture it in three dimensions, because to me, it is very cinematic and landscape[-like]. Like, chords which are the three-dimensional environment of theory, in a way, or a good part of it, are all about emotion, right? So if you hit a IV chord, or a IV/I, instead of just a I, it takes you someplace, if you hit the vi minor instead of the I [a deceptive cadence], it's all about emotion. If you make a ninth chord out of it, it's emotional. Every step of the way, every piece of the game, is a new piece of landscape, is a new color in there. So it's more like, let's try this, okay, what are you seeing right now? Like, what does that really do to your experience of the tune to have that happening? I try to get them talking about that. If they can articulate something about it, then that's useful to me to know which direction to go next. And me being a fairly well-known crazy guy with chords up there on the dance stage, just to bring this full circle here. That's like it's working all the time. I feel like it's a playground and contra dance music involves this ability.......

Well, first of all, assuming that I have free rein, I don't have a co-creator of the chordal zone, which occasionally you do, but there's no bass player in our current unit in the Posse, and it's not very often that... Tristan on the guitar and me on the piano, having carved out complimentary roles where we don't really have to meet and interact, verbally or otherwise with exactly a chord pattern. If we do, we certainly do work it out ahead of time, but most of the time, it's my zone or it's his zone. So okay, there I am up there on the piano, I can basically do any stuff, I can do anything I want, I really can do anything I want. That's just a shocking amount of freedom, when you get right down to it, and we're not even talking about the rhythmic part, which is its own shocking amount of freedom but just the chordal part. I think it goes back... talk about science fiction, it goes back to "with great power comes great responsibility," but of course, it has to tell a story for the dancers, eight bars, 16 bars, 32 bars, the major moments where we all should be very connected, we on stage and they on the floor and the caller as the conduit... we have to touch base with a certain amount of reality that is grounding.

So if I've gone crazy with chords, I always have that in mind. I think all of us who have been able to continue to get gigs with contra dance music and in the backup role, we know this, it's not just like, "do anything you want ha ha," it's "do a lot of what you want but there are rules and there are lines" and you have to play nice. You have to continue to play nice, but that still leaves so much space to do that. So I am generally telling stories—I think we could all articulate some version of that—with the chord patterns that are either prefab, and I'm bringing him into the game, because we all do that. I call those plugins with my students, just like, throw a plug in, it's time for a I-vi-ii-V, or it's time for the slow building ascension, or it's time to sit on the pedal tone, or it's time to sit on the V sus, or whatever... those are all kind of plugins, we know where they happen. We know how long they can happen and where they have to resolve to or what the next plugin is, and so forth. So all of that is in my mind, but sometimes it's totally, crazily spontaneous as well. Those two... games, or three, or whatever it is, are all happening at once. I don't know, maybe it's like three-dimensional chess, or maybe some dimensional chess or something that I'm keeping track. Of course, I'm a fiddler, so I know the tune. Even the tunes that I've never played... that in the case of the Posse, some blistering, technical quasi-Irish tune that Oliver made up that I've never played and never will play on the fiddle, I still kind of know the tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

You grok it.

**Pete Sutherland**

I grok it, exactly. So I know where I am able and not able to go. It's really cool to be able to talk about this, actually. Another direction that I go that also ties in with teaching is, they're like puzzles. Tunes are like puzzles. If you're trying to learn a tune, it's a puzzle, and you recognize a lot of the puzzle once you've put puzzles together for a while. It's like, oh, this is another reel in D, I kinda know the average of where it's gonna go, and I know an ending-ish sort of thing that probably will happen, and I know exactly when that will happen. And yet, there's that part, there's that one part that makes the tune unique and involves some finger pattern, perhaps, that is unexpected. Okay, so that's the puzzle for a more advanced player. In the beginning, everything is a puzzle. It's like, no, that's your second finger, not your first finger. The chord piece is also a puzzle. I enjoy those kind of things and I am proud of like, rarely being stumped I guess. That's like one of my things. It's like, Goddamnit, I'm gonna figure out this missing chord if I end up panting on the floor, on the stage and afterwards, because from the exertion or whatever. I mean, you've been there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you mean like when the tune is asking for a certain chord and you're trying to find that chord for them?

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, exactly. Oh, my God, exactly. So it's usually an original tune of somebody's that is not following any rules. You know, they're just like, "oh, it's kinda cool. It's gonna go to like, ♭vi and then a ii minor, or then a ♭ii minor." Something that no traditional tune ever does, and never will. And then you're going to like, hmmmm, your eyes get all narrow and splitty and then you're into advanced puzzling. That's the thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle with probably about 65 pieces that look exactly alike.

**Julie Vallimont**

And they're all beige.

**Pete Sutherland**

They're all sky.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, right, exactly. Noah does that with the tunes he writes. If he throws a new tune at me, I'm like, oh, there's that thing, oh, I missed it, I'll try this chord and every time the tune goes by you try a new chord in that spot, which is kind of all you can muster sometimes in real time. And you get kind of squinty eyed, I should have looked up at the ceiling, that's what I apparently do when I'm fishing for ideas. You just keep trying things and see if something sticks. It's a fun game.

**Pete Sutherland**

There's a lot of information up there on the ceiling.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's where I keep all my notes.

**Pete Sutherland**

Perhaps the last band that played there, maybe they left some vital piece of information up there. If you just squint, you can see it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that'd be great. If we all left graffiti for other bands on the ceiling where no one else can see it. That'd be so cool. "I-IV-V was here."

**Pete Sutherland**

Chord chart in large print, "here, try this."

**Julie Vallimont**

Circle of fifths.

**Pete Sutherland**

"This might work." "Try a ii, worked for me."

***END PART 1***

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