Contra Pulse Episode 19: Pete Sutherland Part II

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra Pulse, this is Julie Vallimont. Here we are with the second half of our interview with Pete Sutherland – enjoy!

**Julie Vallimont**

So what do you feel is the bare minimum that you need to provide for the dancers, in terms of a structure to keep them happy, so that you can have freedom after that?

**Pete Sutherland**

All right, well, of course, keep the beat. So this is the broader topic, and this is more to do with bands than any one individual person. That's why a band is a magical concoction when it's working, it's undeniably greater than the sum of its parts, to be classic about it. And what does that mean? It means that everything is really integrated, and you're really relying on the other people to do their job, so that you can do yours to the utmost. So in the beginning, in the modern era, it's "who's keeping the beat?" Well, traditionally, everybody has some responsibility to the beat and in the end, they do anyway. But, if you have anything functioning as a drum, which in this decade and in this century, is at least half the time, is feet, somebody doing feet. That's just a watershed thing. It is enormously freeing for us piano players, guitar players, and fiddler players, for everybody.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's the best.

**Pete Sutherland**

Oh my God. You could just hit one note, and the feet are going, and everybody knows where you are, as long as you can count to eight. But I think, speaking as a piano player, I immediately don't have to think like a boom-chuck person anymore. I can think like a pop piano player playing all kinds of syncopation, I can hit an organ patch, or a synth patch, and create something completely otherworldly that would not have been okay if I was the only person providing rhythm. It would have put all the onus on the fiddle player or other melody players to play as rhythmically as they could, because what else would the dancers have to do? You couldn't just play an open fifth on the organ patch. There'd be nothing, you'd have nothing to give to the dancers, but there's the feet going, and I or you, or any keyboard player, would be able to immediately start painting in that realm. So that's huge, that's huge. I think the melody players realized a long time ago—I'm gonna circle back to the Strutters here in a second, because I think we were kind of pioneers at figuring some of this out, back in 1990, or whatever. Anyway, fiddle players and melody players heretofore who played all the notes all the time, because that's what your training is, at least we're faced with the challenge or opportunity, depending on which side of the coin you've looked at, to play less notes, to leave space to do a call-and-response with the rhythm section to sketch the melody, decompose, these are all words that people that I've played with have used over the years, and you probably have some. Like anything that is less than 100% eighth notes is what I'm talking about, and what we all have come to know in contemporary contra dance music as a thing and it follows at least a minimal amount of adhesion to the structure of the dance in that generally, all those kind of activities are still within two bars, four bars, eight bars or something that goes with the figures of the dance. If the dancers are aware that this kind of shenanigans is happening on stage, they're doing, say, right hand around, while the fiddle player is doing a little sketch of a thing. And then when they go do a left hand back, or the left hand with their neighbor, they are not looking for the fiddle player to finish that phrase anymore. They're expecting at this point, that somebody else is going to be improv-ing the next two bars, right? It's like, when did that happen? It started happening a couple of decades ago and now it's like, no one thinks twice about that kind of thing. It's just so intuitive to have that kind of game playing going on up there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, trading, deconstructing the tune, taking half the notes out or starting the phrase and not finishing it. All those things.

**Pete Sutherland**

Rhythm section only. Riff, rhythm section riff. Foot break, drum break.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you started doing it, was anyone else doing that?

**Pete Sutherland**

Well, what I was aware of when the Strutters started was... I guess, we had... not any of us had heard anybody else in the contra dance world doing this. And again, this is like three decades ago, 31 years ago, and counting, 31 years ago that we first got together. And we fell into this idea of deconstruction, and it was driven by the drums, really, and our drummer is a very outspoken guy, and he would say, "play off the drums." This is not drums accompanying fiddle tunes. This is everybody working together. It's a new game that we're playing here.

**Julie Vallimont**

And the Strutters have such a wide variety of grooves, which is certainly a lot easier to do when you have drums.

**Pete Sutherland**

I brought that in because of how the existence of drums has helped me develop a completely different approach to contra dance piano playing. I only have two things that I really do on the piano. One is my singer-songwriter piano, pretty basic, and then contra dance piano. To get away from the boom-chuck thing as an exclusive tool, and there's no judgment that I'm making about the beauty of that either, because I love simple stuff. But, I am very aware as soon as there's drums—and we'll call feet drums for the moment. As soon as there's drums, I'm aware of how much freedom I now have to paint. I'm sure that somebody else is—if you're talking to anybody else that is in this kind of zone in a band as well and has the opportunity to experience this and practice their craft and develop it this way, I begin to think about what other instruments do. And I really began even though I didn't get to play piano a lot in the Strutters because I was third in line, behind two other great piano players, but occasionally I did, of how little I actually had to do with all that sound going on. It ended up often being like salsa, where if you watch salsa players, that person is not even using their left hand most of the time. They're just doing this [sings a salsa riff] thing with their right hand, just little fingers.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like a montuno kind of thing.

**Pete Sutherland**

Exactly. And so for me, it was horns... I just started thinking about horns. There's a lot of wisdom to be had from top to bottom, in that I think if you're going to play jazz fiddle, which I don't really, or swing fiddle... a lot of great fiddlers have attempted it and come up with their own language. But to me, we should all be listening to a tenor sax when we do that. Because they really developed the nuance, they developed the sound, the sound itself, and the moves, and the phrasing, and the tone, and what am I missing? All of that stuff. A good jazz fiddler, I feel like, in my opinion, I feel like the best you could do is be an alto sax or a tenor sax. That's when you're at the top of your game.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's what you should aspire to.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, that's what you should aspire to. So anyway, the other end of the of the spectrum with that listening is a classic horn section hit, and riffs and stuff that's eminently transferable to postmodern contra dance piano, in my opinion. I feel like, unconsciously, at least, I, and a lot of other piano players who, again, who are suddenly experiencing this newfound freedom to be creative outside the boom-chuck, go there. It's probably intuitive. It's probably instinctive. It's just such a huge part of American music, right? Is the horn section, big bands. If we're not going to ever have the experience up on the bandstand of a horn section, which a few bands, of course, have been able to engineer. So, like a way to make even less money at a contra dance: invite more people. But assuming somebody can write a chart, anyway, that's been done. It's been done. But generally, most of us won't have that opportunity. So, where was I going with that? The piano player suddenly gets to be that person and it's just totally fun. To me, that was a quantum leap when I realized that.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you're working with an ensemble that big, one way to stay out of each other's way is each of you carve out your little musical space, and then you can really focus on that musical space that you're occupying.

**Pete Sutherland**

Totally that, totally that... interlocking parts. I think I was trying to say that earlier.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I'm curious to go on little bit of a sidebar but you know about like Zimbabwean music, or the three-over-two feel, or those kind of rhythms that work well for contra dancing surprisingly, you might not think they would, but because jigs are a thing that you can play around with. What was that experience like for you?

**Pete Sutherland**

Pretty liberating. There is a lot of pretty fast 6/8 music out there in... certainly Central African music and Shona, Mbira music is, and we definitely messed around with some of those tunes and those riffs, and slowing them down didn't always do the tunes themselves, or the tradition, any service at all, but it was a great exercise to try to work on that. Ethiopian music that I referenced earlier, that became part of the Clayfoot Strutters' early adoption. Some of that was in 6/8 and 9/8... 9/8 is not useful in contra, but at least it gave us this idea of how we might go there. A lot of bands are uber familiar with the blues thing of the shuffle, the blues shuffle. That's almost like second nature for everybody. I, personally, I get a little tired of that, but... and big halftime groove, if you've got a drummer, it's fun. Dancers like it, but I feel like to do that all the time is kind of..., or find that as your black hole that you're sliding into every time you play jigs is, I'm not personally satisfied with that kind of thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

I kind of agree with you. I got bored of the jigs being slinky jigs trope.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, the slinky jig. It's like, how about, can we just play bouncy jigs? How about, let's just like, have fun with some good old New England jigs? How about we play Dusty Bob and just like, have fun with that, that you could not possibly turn into a slinky jig if your life depended on it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Since when did jigs have to be sexy? You know, that's such a funny question.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, it just became, I don't know. We'd almost go off the record here. But everyone is guilty. The Strutters played a lot of that kind of stuff. The Posse has been very vocal with each other, which is part of our modus operandi is like, if somebody really has a feeling, like we're talking about right now about something. They're not shy. They say so. It's like, tell me something you like about what we're doing right now. But also, if you don't like it, don't clam up. Don't be Mr. Pouty Face stewing in your own corner about it. You're not serving anybody that way. Do you actually hate what I'm doing right now? I'd rather know now. I don't want to find out later.

**Julie Vallimont**

At its most noble, I think that's an important part of the process, because I feel like a band is at its best when everybody's in the zone together. So finding out what to say no to just paves the way for what to say yes to, and it helps you hone in on what your sound and your aesthetic is gonna be. So that's a fun way to justify being the "I don't like that what you're doing right now" person.

**Pete Sutherland**

I've read enough of the nonviolent communication manual to have figured out at least how to not be really antagonistic about it. "I really need you to play the bass, the chord tone, the tonic, I need you to play the tonic. So that I can work out a part on top of it that will feel like we're actually going to serve the dance," or something like that. Or, "I don't really hear myself, that's an interesting chord you're playing there, but I don't really hear, how about ..." ...yeah, anyway.

**Julie Vallimont**

These are useful skills as a producer as well, when you're in studio with people and you're chatting... tactfully guide them in a certain direction.

**Pete Sutherland**

Well, we could have another hour and a half on peace adventures and group therapy. I only had one group do a retreat with me and then break up out of those 80 projects, so......

**Julie Vallimont**

Not bad.

**Pete Sutherland**

That's not too bad. I only got fired once, and I only had that happen once. Mostly things have been really pretty good. That allowed me to learn more about communication, really, that experience of working with other bands and having to coax communication out of people that were not really effectively communicating, people that were patently passive aggressive, or just real textbook stuff.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, you have to set up a safe musical space where ideas like, you'll "yes, and..." each other's ideas, and people can feel comfortable bringing up ideas so that then, when you do want to say no to an idea, that's an okay part of the process. You can't just say you don't like things unless there's this bigger creative safety process there where you trust each other.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, exactly. It's not to say that we bat 1000 in the Posse, or that any group bats 1000, I'm sure that you can line up about six people in a Zoom call, that would be an interesting sort of Zoom call, is just hone in on one particular topic. Maybe you could engineer that in your current life and be like a workshop at a festival or something.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, those panels where they have six people on stage, it's, you know, each taking turns talking about one topic.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, "what's a couple of the most effective tools that you have honed for moving a conversation through a tough spot, through a sticky spot, about group process to get through it and feel like the wheels are moving again?" Because we've all been there, right? We've all been there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely. When you started doing all this stuff with the Clayfoot Strutters, how did people react to it? I'm kind of curious what the context was, of what you were doing at the time and was it new and exciting? Was it like, oh, we've had other crazy bands like this before? Did you feel like you were doing anything scandalous? Or was it just fun, or...?

**Pete Sutherland**

Well, none of us will ever forget. Let's see, I guess I can say where it was, it was at DEFFA, the Downeast Folk Festival in Portland [Topsham, Maine], or wherever it was being held. It was one of the early festivals that we got hired at. I think [George Marshall](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-13-george-marshall/) was there with us. Like, again, he was kind of our angel, he got us hired at various places, he really, truly believed in what we were doing. But at that time, there was almost zero bands with drums. And feet were not even a really big thing yet, I don't think, unless you were literally just playing Québécois music. So before that, [unintelligible]. So we basically had no firewall, or forcefield, or whatever, we were just rocketing into the contra dance world, unapologetically drums front and center, and this big sound. And the reason that we were probably able to get our foot in a number of doors right away was just who we were as well-known people... so Jeremiah, me, there was pretty soon Mark Roberts, Peter Davis and our various bass players and other guitar players that came and went. So, various people, and so that's the way to get a gig. It's like, "oh, Jeremiah. Cool. Love him." So [we would] get the gig. But it was pretty early on that George, I think, got us this gig at DEFFA. Should this be off the record or, it was a long time ago, and we've played there since.

**Julie Vallimont**

We can decide afterwards.

**Pete Sutherland**

The Posse played there. So you know, I wasn't blacklisted forever myself. There was a famous incident when the Posse played there, with a horrible ear-destroying feedback. But that was its own adventure. But what happened when the Strutters went there was, we played our first set on Friday, like a welcome contra kind of thing in the afternoon. And then there was the potluck supper and stuff. And so everybody's like going around and going around, we kind of did that band thing where we went out to get some Chinese food and came back. And there was apparently a very heated argument going on amongst the organizers. Not all of whom had necessarily, entirely grokked what the Strutters were or what they sounded like, and they were not happy. They were not happy. It just wasn't their cup of tea, as it were. And George, in his inimitable smiling, George Marshall way, came and broke this news to us, it's like, well, I'm having this, you can imagine George Marshall doing this, no smile ever leaves his face ever, even in the face of impending doom. It's awesome. We used to say if there's a nuclear war, you definitely want to be somewhere within about 50 yards of George, because he'll tell you what bus to get on, exactly when it leaves to get the hell out of there. So anyway, he came up to us said, well, smiling, there's some discussion happening. I just wanted to let you know before you retake the stage at eight o'clock. So I guess they worked it out, because we played the weekend. That's just an anecdotal thing. I was not aware of necessarily a lot more of that going on. I mean, basically, if somebody had heard us and wanted to hire us, they kind of already had figured out how to negotiate with their team. You know, any questions that might be had? And if there was one or two dissenting voices, well, I guess it's like the old consensus building kind of thing or something. That, coupled with the fact that we were expensive because we were big, I mean, there's a lot of places we never played. So that's fine. That's totally fine.

**Julie Vallimont**

This was, I'm sure, some years ago. But you know, DEFFA is in Maine and it's a wonderful, wonderful dance community there. It feels like a more local community to me. I don't know about back then. But at least my experiences in it now, where it's wonderful, because you can go to a dance and you don't really care who's playing because you just want to see your friends. And the bands are always great. And they're made up of very local people. And it's a more like, kind of... that regular contra sound of a bunch of people playing tunes together and having fun. So I can imagine a band like the Clayfoot Strutters, where there's drums and not tunes and loud things and crazy grooves, would be quite the surprise.

**Pete Sutherland**

This was back when this is like, well, it was no later than about 1994, 1993, might have been earlier. So that's a long time ago. If you cast your brain down chronology of some of the other bands that came along doing various edgy and avant-garde things, not many of them were in existence in 1993. This was when Wild Asparagus, which has been around for like centuries, was still considered pretty avant-garde.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was [Nightingale](https://www.nightingalevt.org/) a thing?

**Pete Sutherland**

Not quite, it was just forming in the early 90s, just locally in Montpelier, and they weren't well known at all. They, of course, launched the golden age of trios. You know, with [making more sound than any three people could be thought to make](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCXIKuStVcM), and many, many, many, many bands owe so much to that group. Like, pretty much every trio owes a lot to Nightingale.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, absolutely.

**Pete Sutherland**

They deserve their own mega-chapter in this book, for sure. Everybody now gets to have their own experience that we're talking about, if they change one or more component of the expected playing for contra dances, and they happen to find themselves in a setting where that was not really part of the, how to put this, it's not why you got hired, you didn't get hired for being creative. You get hired for being, like, creative, but maybe not that creative; or innovative, but maybe not that innovative, or something. And it still exists. I mean, you could go to a thing like, Ralph Page, an amazing weekend, it's not about edgy, postmodern contra dance music, it's about honoring the amazing solid four-on-the-floor contra dance music and calling and repertoire traditions and style, the whole style, is why people go there. The Posse got hired there, several years back courtesy of a couple of our friendly neighborhood callers. We were allowed to be what they considered... in their hiring thing, they had the trad band, and then of the two guests bands, the trad band, and they had the not-quite-so-trad band, of course, but even there we were probably a little further to the left than most non-trad bands were, and we worked really hard at trad-ing ourselves up for that, you know... we'd like to learn a bunch of... you know, I just wanted to make sure that my bandmates weren't gonna like embarrass me by not knowing the chords to [Hull's Victory](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0KdRBMppBQE) or something like that. So we worked hard on it and went down there, and I'm very lucky because my partner Oliver Scanlon, who's been playing with me since he was 10, came up through the ranks of this after school group that I was teaching very trad material, like Canterbury [Dance] Orchestra material. So he actually knew all those tunes. That helped a lot. I guess we must have blown our cover numerous times, because there were anecdotes from the floor reported to us, afterwards. There was somebody out there dancing, who said to his partner "If I wanted to hear this kind of music, I would go to a Bernie Sanders rally."

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a great compliment.

**Pete Sutherland**

That's what we thought, and we've used that line ever since.

**Julie Vallimont**

You guys are socialists.

**Pete Sutherland**

We'll use that in rehearsal sometimes... "if I want to hear that chord I'd go to a Bernie Sanders rally." Thanks to the audience for all our best lines.

**Julie Vallimont**

They enlighten us in so many ways.

**Pete Sutherland**

There's a thing about the line... where's the line? Every gig, of course, as you well know, is potentially, unless you do the same kind of gig over and over, once you're on an endless contra dance tour, and you just play basically the same kind of evening for this crowd, this crowd, this crowd, and this crowd... it's kind of cookie cutter, in a way. And then you get to just be yourself, and you don't have to worry about the line having both, but if you're one of the bands that is taking every opportunity for gigs, including concerts, and then playing like a wedding for beginners, and then playing a festival with some super hot dancers, and then the next night you're playing where half the crowd is walk-ins and the tempos are different, or your caller has got a completely different languaging going on, then the line, the center line, it's always moving. It's always moving in terms of what you can do. I don't mind that, personally.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's an interesting question. Like you're telling that anecdote about Ralph Page. What is traditional in that sense? Is it a question of what tunes you're playing, is it a question of are you playing tunes or not, is it instrumentation, is it groove? Is it weird chords, you know, is it arrangements, and are there arrangements, and how weird are those arrangements? I feel like we could make instead of an X/Y axis, you could have like, eight different axes and have sliders along each of them. Because I think of Pete's Posse as a more traditional band than the Clayfoot Strutters, partly because of your instrumentation, and because you do play more tunes per evening, but then there's a lot of things that obviously people don't consider traditional.

**Pete Sutherland**

Exactly, a little bit apples and oranges, just because of the dynamics of the band and the makeup and the opportunities for sharing the lead, and the huge rhythm section. I mean, in the Strutters I sometimes was the fiddler, backed up by five other people.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Pete Sutherland**

Which is just kind of amazing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Groove is the tune in a way, you're dancing to the groove with the Clayfoot Strutters.

**Pete Sutherland**

The groove is the experience, the fiddle is almost just like frosting on top, in a way. I think the Posse owes a lot to the Strutters. The Posse owes a lot to Metamora, my concert band, basically because of me being a through line, I suppose. I brought all my lives to bear on that. Like all trios, again, we owe a lot to the founders of the golden age of trios that we're in now, Nightingale. In terms of this amazing sonic range and groove division of labor, we don't have an accordion. But other than that, we do what a lot of other trios do. I'm missing some other elements to talk about this right now. I feel like choice of material is still a huge piece. That should give everybody heart, if you're willing to keep looking for yet another interesting, melodic idea out there, whether you're going to write it, or you're going to find it somewhere else. It births an entire new opportunity. Early on, I had this tune that one of my mandolin students at one time gave me... it was a Bollywood tune. It's just [sings a riff]. It's not contra dance music, but it is. That's the mindset that we now all find ourselves in, right? If we're doing the experimental thing, it's like, we instantly know that that's not a contra dance tune, and we instantly recognize that it could be.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. It's catchable, it's phrased.

**Pete Sutherland**

It's totally 32 bars or possibly. It just needs a little bit of sanding in order to be ready to be 32 bars.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is it catchy? Is it phrased? Is it the right length? And can it go at the proper tempo, which to me ruins a lot of good tunes. I discovered that my favorite tempo is about 94 [beats per minute]. I would hear all these tunes and fall in love with them on various albums be, oh, that goes at 94. It's an awkward thing where you can't double time it or slow it down. It's just right in between, and it just doesn't work.

**Pete Sutherland**

Well, [you could be like the Horseflies and just say, it's my way or the highway, we're gonna play at 94](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHki6PKMlvo). And just screw you, just have fun, that's where we're at. But most people can't get away with that. So you're right.

**Julie Vallimont**

The Strutters have a reputation for being a little bit on the slower/groovier side.

**Pete Sutherland**

We love it, and so does the Posse now. If we had our druthers, we'd be around 100, I think, or 104, or something like that. And it just galls me that a lot of people think if it's any slower than 116 it's crap. It's like, how about you just like, take a chill pill and enjoy being in your body, with your partner, with your neighbors and not like trying to catch a subway here?

**Julie Vallimont**

Shake your hips a little bit. I mean, the different grooves make it easier to go slow because you have something to do with your body in that dead space when you're not moving. I think some people love it and some people it's not their jam. I think some people really love the feeling of momentum in contra dancing, where you're moving forward and progressing and constantly moving. And maybe the slow tempos don't allow that for them. But then they can go dance to something else, right?

**Pete Sutherland**

They can, totally. What's the slowest that you feel like you've ever gotten away with playing?

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, wow, probably not much less than 100 for me.

**Pete Sutherland**

Right, exactly, same. I think if it goes below there somebody's gonna call you out. Somebody is, dancers or the caller. The callers, bless their hearts, they're only trying to keep everybody connected and happy. So it's not like they're birthing their own sense of morality about the whole thing. They're just being your firewall against some dancers that are gonna rush the stage in a fit of pique, because you're going too slow and they can't deal with it. That's how I read it, anyway. So they become sort of proactive about policing your tempos. It's taken me a long time to adopt that attitude. In the beginning, I was like, the heck with you. We're gonna play at the tempo that, I know how to play contra dance music. I've been doing it since 1973. I can feel 112, 114, 116, 118, I feel them in my bones. And I do. I just might not want to play 116 at the moment, this tune might just sound like crap at 116. It might really need to be 108 or 104. Can you allow us to just have that power to make our own decision about this musical experience for dancing? That's a big topic, too, isn't it, really? Oh my God. Who has the power? Where is the balance of power?

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, it's a consensus, ultimately. If any one of us, the dancers, the caller, or the musicians go too far in any direction, we'll get pulled back to the center, like a rubber band. Because it won't work for the dancers, or you won't get hired. But there is a thing of like, the dancers drive what bands have to be. And vice versa. And now, as a band, you're trying to tell the dancers how to dance in a way, musically, you know? Groove and tempo.

**Pete Sutherland**

Well, and as you said... well you didn't say it this way, but we used to say, "there's a lot for the lower chakra in all these grooves." So we used to say, "dance with your lower body as much as your upper body." If this music is moving you at all. The late Dave Grant, our bass player in the Strutters, would have put it much less succinctly.

**Julie Vallimont**

So what's your favorite music to dance to?

**Pete Sutherland**

To contra dance to?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, there's so many different kinds of dance music out there, and you've made so many different kinds of it. What do you like? Do you make the music you would like to dance to? Or do you make the music that you like to make?

**Pete Sutherland**

I always want to dance to the band that I'm in, for sure. It doesn't mean it's my favorite-favorite. But it's definitely... we're trying to make the music that we personally would love to dance to. Yeah, so for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a great cruelty that contra dance musicians never get to dance to themselves on the dance floor. You can dance to a recording of yourself at home, but it's never the same experience.

**Pete Sutherland**

The closest I came was in the last year or two of the Strutters, three maybe, we imported Oliver into the band and did some gigs with double fiddles. And then one or another of us got to step off stage and dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, fun.

**Pete Sutherland**

He, you know, he does play enough. He adopted the Strutter aesthetic about where the fiddle is, because he had been dancing to the Strutters since he was a little boy. So you know, he grokked it. I could go on the floor and it sounded exactly like the Strutters. That was one opportunity for sure, but that didn't happen hardly ever.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's kind of like cooking for other people, and you never get to taste what you're cooking. Except when maybe once in a while when it's like cold leftovers, you could have a bite and see how it was, but you never get to taste it right when it's fresh out of the oven. You've got to look at everybody's faces and try to guess what it's like, using your years of experience.

**Pete Sutherland**

Right, even less so in this experience, with not getting to dance out there. We lament that a lot, because we all dance. In our band, we all dance. So... me, not as much anymore. I've just got old guy issues, but I have danced a lot. I always imagine what it would feel like, which also helps in being a reality check on some of my more adventurous moves that I might make is, could I dance to that? We have more conservative friends that we've adopted some of their philosophies, some of their lines. So there's one fellow who said, "You're not here to serve yourself, you're here to serve the dancers." And he said it with an accent, basically, because he's from a foreign country. I don't want to go any closer to that. Every band that is gonna chew up the miles in the van some way, and one of the ways you come up with your entire lingo and folklore, and so that's entered Posse folklore as well. "You're not here to serve yourself, you're here to serve the dancers." So that's shorthand for saying, "I think you have at least considered you're going a little too far right now."

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, I'd be curious to hear, it's such a big question. Again, I don't know how to ask it. But just like thinking about tradition, it seems like you've spent a lot of your career dancing with tradition, in a way where you're learning from it, and informed by it, and then creating new traditions, and then dancing around tradition, and subverting tradition, and passing on tradition. And coming at it from so many different angles. Like you seem like you understand tradition, but you're not a traditionalist, in a way.

**Pete Sutherland**

Thank you, well, I guess that's the place to end up. I was never going to be either one or the other. I referred earlier to not growing up with this music at all. So it was just like discovering a lost planet. When I did get there, coming out of my rock and roll years, realizing that I had a pretty good ear, listening to a lot of neo folk rock kind of stuff, just... a lot of the ingredients were boiling around, and that's never left me at all, even when I set out to learn old time music, which is my first language on the fiddle still, before I even attempted to play some more technical stuff from the Irish side or Scottish or whatever. I got sucked into the amazing groove world of old time music and was playing banjo, too, and all of that. But even there, in really apprenticing myself resolutely to certain players in certain traditions from the upper south, I still was not a purist. I just could not be a purist. I'm just mentioning that because I think that's kind of emblematic of my life, in a way. It's like there are some of my fellow aficionados of old time music, which is a small, extremely loyal and devout community. Many of them really don't like any other kinds of music at all. It's like opera, or heavy metal or something like that. There are certain communities it's like, that's it, I don't need any other music. Bluegrass maybe, for some people. I've never been any of those. Some of my fellow old time players and devotees, I was super aware that they didn't consider me very old time. Which in the beginning was like, really disheartening. I don't know, dismaying in a way. It's like, "what? I'm trying so hard! I'm wearing out these friggin' tapes, these cassette tapes, working on the bowing and everything else. What do you mean? What do you mean, I don't sound old time?” I went through that whole period where it was like, "I'll never find my voice," because I was also trying to learn Irish tunes or Québécois tunes, and I was still writing songs and I was doing all this stuff. It just seemed to be counterproductive to finding my own way through. And now I realize, of course, long story short, that's been the gift in my life, is to not actually give up and not say, "well, that was wrong, I should just do one thing, I should just follow one tradition, I should just play one instrument, I should just be the best traditional New England fiddle player I could be or I should just apprentice myself to Bob McQuillen and then just learn everything he ever did," or you name it, the list could go on. But I just, I didn't do that. I just didn't do that. Because I like it all too much.

**Julie Vallimont**

How have you seen the contra dance scene changing? Do you have any thoughts about, besides this weird hiatus that we're all on because of COVID, do you have any thoughts about where it's headed in the future, or opinions about where you might like to see it head, or anything like that?

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, we kind of just have to take COVID out of the equation, right? Because oh, my lord, when it comes back, whenever that is, it's just gonna be so much pent up energy that we just can't even imagine. But if it had been allowed to continue through might be a better postulate for this question. Where was it going? Where will it be going after the blip? The great blip. I feel like there will always be more bands. Either pick up bands of convenience, supergroups that rise and fall quickly, attempts at a band for the for the long haul. And among those bands that are real strong adherence to one tradition or another, one thing that was certainly happening will continue to happen, and it's partly just economically driven, is trios and duets. Because money, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

Especially when travel is involved, if you have to fly somewhere, drive somewhere long distances.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, holy crap. And you know, as well as I, there's like a dance weekend, they're not really very interested in hearing very much about your quartet or quintet. Anyway, I mean, if they already love you or if you have a caller in the group or sound person in the group or something like that, then maybe we'll talk but, but duo, and trio, that's kind of, it's about it. So that's a big change. In terms of the sound that you get out of that, well, it's a good thing that trios have been an evolving and enriching experience to apprentice yourself to, and to experience the limits of, and to add your own language to post-Nightingale post-other trios and you could speak to the duo thing, I'm sure. I've never been in a more contemporary duo. But obviously, there's a number of really notable groups, like yourselves [Buddy System] and Perpetual e-Motion, and Notorious, and people that just make a lot of sound for two people. Maybe that's the most identifiable thing that's happening right now. How much sound can three people make? How much sound can two people make? And given some kind of answer to that, where are you going, what kind of elements are you going to make a part of your sound that are already common and ones that are maybe not so common that you can try out, which could be a new instrument, could be new repertoire that has nothing to do with any preexisting sense of contra dance music that comes from before, like Bollywood.

**Julie Vallimont**

Microtonal? [jokingly] Maybe that's the only place for...

**Pete Sutherland**

Microtonal, like you with your Moog synthesizer there, or whatever that you're pulled out.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or how about things not in a 12-note scale? Like, how about gamelan, things that aren't even tuned to A440? It would end all pick-up bands.

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, there you go. I don't think people have really scratched the surface, really, if you're able to do that kind of thinking, but even on a milder level, it's just like, getting the melodica really identified as being not just this... It's not like our version of a bombard. It's not like, just make everybody go, "whoo hoo!" Bombard, to me, it's great, it's a great tradition. But if that's not a cheap trick, I don't know what it is. That's really what it is. It's like bringing out a dog and squeezing it so hard that it barks into a microphone. That's a cheap trick.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's novelty.

**Pete Sutherland**

"Here's my dog. Okay, let's put that dog away in its in its little crate again and maybe we'll pull it out in the second set."

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like you'd like the melodica to be viewed as a traditional instrument and not just a novelty instrument.

**Pete Sutherland**

Totally. Well, it's not tonally that weird. A good-toned professional model melodica is like an accordion on just one stop [with one voice/reed set sounding], a simple stop, or concertina, or something like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I have a Hohner melodica. It has the same metal reeds in it that they put in Hohner accordions, you know.

**Pete Sutherland**

Exactly, or like a large harmonica, or something like that. Right. So that's one thing and, banjo, five string banjo, playing along in Celtic repertoire. Still, it's kind of novel, it's kind of novel. The keyboard, back to the keyboard... using the organ stop or the synth stop. There are still people that think that that's too weird for words. I am just one of those people that are like, "no, I think this is a great idea." And that's a way that I am going to expand our palette, when the feet are going or some rhythmic elements going, and just check it out here. Vocals. Oh, yeah. We have worked out quite a few things with vocals on them. We're not the only ones. I think we're as well known for it as anybody, and it's not just our covers of "Light My Fire" and George Harrison and things like that, that we'll pull out— it's truly French Canadian—turlutte.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's mouth singing.

**Pete Sutherland**

Singing along with the tune, mouth singing. All with great respect for when the caller's done their thing, so it never appears before about the ninth time through the dance, when hopefully the caller is done having to be on the mic, and then we take over there. I would not be surprised if more and more groups used that element as well. That's a few. Maybe the simple thing will change too. Maybe people will be into dancing slower.

**Julie Vallimont**

I had this fantasy for a while, once I discovered that I really like... 94 beats per minute is my favorite tempo, and I wanted to do all my techno contras at 94. I really wanted to, like... some late night party, get a bunch of friends and invent a way of contra dancing that's slow, because you'd have to add new moves and new flourishes. You'd have to move differently in order to even make that possible. It’s something we've joked for years and years and never done it.

**Pete Sutherland**

Well, I think if people are willing to stay in the zone of how they recreate movement with any new kind of backbeat, or any "normal" contra tempos... like techno contra. People probably, subconsciously, and maybe later consciously, actually change their dancing, right? It could be self-fulfilling prophecy that people are actually... the kind of people that would go to a techno contra are people that are already dancing that way, they're already going to move their body differently, they're already going to be using their lower body in a different way than a lot of other people who don't techno contra. The tempo thing is, I think, is a bigger acid test, maybe. I think you hit the nail on the head.

**Julie Vallimont**

I can see people, the same dancers who go to the regular dance with a regular band come to techno contra and they start moving differently, and it's really fun, just like people dance differently to Pete's Posse, you take the same people and put them in front of the Clayfoot Strutters, they're gonna move differently. And that's really fun.

**Pete Sutherland**

We're giving you a different information to dance to. This is apropos of nothing, it was years ago, at our fiddle camp Northeast Heritage, when Sandy McIntyre, the great old traditional Cape Breton fiddler, was on staff, and we had a dance every night where different people on the staff played, and not all of them played for dances regularly. So, it was just such a great potluck of stuff, and it still happens. People just play their repertoire, and people get to dance to it. He started playing, not a march but he played it, it's like an MSR, March Strathspey Reel set. Somebody cued him in that the march wasn't gonna work. So he started running with a couple of strathspeys at the beginning of the contras, and, you know, interesting is not the word for it. So we're just doing a simple forward and back, David Kaynor was calling, the affable David Kaynor in his prime, just going to keep going. It's like, you either could dance sort of a half time or sort of double times, like you were saying before, but nothing in between. It had no relationship to the narrow range of contra dance tempos. So we all ended up dancing double time. As you go forward, back, you know, 1, 2, 3, 4, and back, 2, 3... this was going like [makes faster noises]. We all felt like we were in some kind of cartoon.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like you'd been sped up or something.

**Pete Sutherland**

I don't know what Sandy McIntyire was thinking, looking out, and everyone hardly could stand up because they're doubled over laughing, like we can't believe we're doing it. That's definitely one of the high points.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's amazing.

**Pete Sutherland**

It was totally amazing. You'd just talk about, if you were there, you just started talking about it, and you just can't talk, you're laughing so hard. You can picture it, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, absolutely. I mean, it's fun to mess with the dances a little bit. You know, maybe that wasn't totally intentional, but I know bands who will play a waltz and then switch to a polka in the middle. You're ruining somebody's day, but it's also kind of fun, you know, all that kinda of stuff. That sort of mayhem thing.

**Pete Sutherland**

We've never pulled this one off, but we were going to pull this on some caller and just start playing something in 7/8. And just see how long it took for everything to completely fall apart. Not long, I imagine.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh my gosh, that'd be so hard. I've had callers not be able to hear the phrasing and a tune and think that we were off when we weren't, that happens sometimes. And then that ultimately is on us. Then maybe that tune isn't a great dance tune, or needs to be accompanied differently, or phrased differently, or something.

**Pete Sutherland**

Exactly, that's a tough one. And you're right, we can whine and we can argue, but it's on us. There's a lot of tunes that would work, and we should just kind of take a step back and reevaluate. That's why old time music doesn't always work because it can be one chord. Best tune in the world. One chord, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

So you don't have the chords to give you that phrasing. And some old time tunes, their phrasing is not in the four-bar chunks that we're used to.

**Pete Sutherland**

I would never do that, Will Mentor and I right now are, he's up here in Burlington when he's working. He's an art professor at St. Mike's college in Colchester, and he's been stuck here. We go for nice masked walks. And we've ended up having this long running conversation about wouldn't it be great to put together an entire evening of dance and music repertoire that the dancing was all contra dance repertoire, a contra dance evening. No squares, and the entire musical repertoire was from various corners of the old time music world, the Appalachian and Midwestern and deep South, and really go deep. We'd really go deep about why does this sounding tune work for this kind of field of dance. We'd draw the lines really tightly, and then we just have a lot of conversation. We're almost halfway through a potential program that we actually...end of pandemic and we're all still alive, we want to actually try out.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's really interesting.

**Pete Sutherland**

Because I don't think it's ever been done. Because, there's old time and there's old time. There's some where just like, a real shit kickin', amodal tune that doesn't have any chords is perfect. It's no different than playing an Irish tune that is just hell for leather. There's other ones where you really need to hear the phrasing much better. There's some that are the more elegant cotillion kind of old time tunes. There's some that are marchy, or some that are Civil War. You know, the B part goes into the minor... kind of mournful stuff, and there's good old Galax tunes that are happy, and there's this all different old time and the bluesy, raggy... there's rags. There's midwestern tunes that are very much right off the boat and sound a lot like the voyageurs or something.

**Julie Vallimont**

So the devil's advocate in me would say, why would you take all these beautiful kinds of old time and want to try to contra dance to them? I think what's interesting is by pairing them up to dances, you're distilling some of the fields from each of these traditions and kind of comparing them to each other in that way, and that's interesting.

**Pete Sutherland**

It's a wild thesis. When I first visited Bloomington, Indiana, in 1980, the dance was already 10 years old. The strongest musical tradition there on the part of people that were playing the dance was old time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Pete Sutherland**

That's pretty much what you always heard occasionally, Miles Krassen, who lived there, played some Irish music. By the time I got there it was anything. There's some amazing players, various traditions, so I was doing the contra dancing that I first experienced in Bloomington was of all old time music. They had never known anything else. And those dancers, more importantly, those dancers being new to the whole idea of contra dancing out there, in the hinterlands, never having been even set foot in New England. They didn't know any better. They're like, "this is a contra dance, this is the music. Hello. What's the big deal?" And the tempos were a little fast. They were up there, 120, 122. I just mean, you kept your feet a little closer to the floor and not so many flourishes, but it totally worked.

**Julie Vallimont**

In a sense, that's tradition, right? It's sort of like, you play whatever instruments you have around, you play whatever music you happen to have in your community and you make a dance out of it. And that's a tradition in its own way, you know?

**Pete Sutherland**

Absolutely. The other end of the scale...[unintelligible]...there are many ends of the scales. My ex-wife did a summer in Labrador, Canada and tried to organize a little community there and they had had them. So there was one old timer that called one dance. One quadrille, or it was maybe a piece of The Lancers, like... there were two figures, and people would then sit down and then stuff themselves on some store bought cookies or something. And then the accordion player played, the fiddlers had all died out, it was just an accordion. Then about an hour later, somebody said let's dance! And what do you think they did? The same dance with the same tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

You do what you know.

**Pete Sutherland**

That's a party, that's a party right there.

**Julie Vallimont**

I could dance the Virginia Reel all night and be totally happy.

**Pete Sutherland**

Could you do it to the same tune and could you do it every party that you went to and never do anything else? Or would you feel like it was Groundhog Day? That's the question.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, right. And then the question is, are you just doing it at weddings and parties once in a while, or if you're like a weekly urban dancer and your dance is like your form of entertainment, you want something more than that, right? Then if you're just like blowing off steam after a day of work, or after your wedding with your friends and you just want to party together, it's a little bit of a difference.

**Pete Sutherland**

In my cynical youth—hopefully I'm shedding most of it as I get old—I would say, it's all these people with desk jobs, that really are just so frustrated. And also they're working at their programming or whatever. So they are bringing all of that energy to contra dance, evening contra dance situations, and they want variety and they want, like, really science-y, what's the latest, cool moves.. They don't want any dance to evoke another dance. I suppose the music maybe was part of their thinking, but mostly it was about the choreography and the callers really took it on the chin. Because that made the callers have to really stay up late, like trying to learn more and more and more repertoire and just travel with a gazillion little file cards. I think the musicians often get off really easy in that way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and it means that there are callers who love adding to the repertoire and writing new dances, and they're very prolific, but then that can accidentally mean that the ones who don't do that, they fall out of favor, or they slowly disappear, that style of calling. Or you just have a bunch of dances in your head, and you don't need a box of cards and your dances aren't as complex.

**Pete Sutherland**

When people started including chestnuts again, it was a great thing... or trying to have evenings that were all chestnuts, which is a commercial disaster. Like, how many people want to do that? Not very many, just at Ralph Page once a year, maybe. So one or two chestnuts, like your Chorus Jig. You have an evening, a really nice evening, a variety pack of some old favorites, some new favorites, try to keep everybody happy. And then you throw Chorus Jig in there, well, that's fine. It's sort of on the same level as you get to do one square. A few people are like grumbling, grumbling about ever doing any square dance, even if it was the coolest square dance in the world, or even if it was being called by the coolest caller in the world. You know, it's just like, whatever, dude. "Tough luck we're gonna waste eight minutes of your life, you're never going to get back while we do this square dance. Go out and sit on the porch or something, talk to somebody." But for us, it's the chance to really stretch our legs a little bit. Now it's a little bit... almost expected in some places, anyway, if you don't do the chestnut thing...Now it's like... the epitome of that is Money Musk. So if you get into certain situation, the same people who are the cool hip dancers wanting to do the cool hip dances with their cool hip friends, to the cool hip band or something. There's this little bird in their brain, it chirps out "Money Musk!" Well, I'm not putting them down. It's great. It's like, I love Money Musk too, but it's almost a formulaic thing. And I'd prefer that it was a little less expected, and maybe it will be, maybe that's one way that people will be able to move forward. It's like, okay, we've had that experience, what other cool dances are out there besides Chorus Jig and Money Musk that we might also enjoy. People have heard of Rory O'More and Petronella because we adopted the signature figures from those things. "Why don't we do Rory O'More?" "Huh? Oh, sure, okay."

**Julie Vallimont**

Especially when these dances disappear, or they begin to disappear, at first, you just want to bring him back and then there's a buzz to bringing them back. And then they can kind of settle back into some kind of normalcy, maybe, and other ones can start to come out.

**Pete Sutherland**

I hope I qualified that whole Money Musk thing well enough, like people aren't gonna be like, "Pete, get over it. Money Musk, it's classic."

**Julie Vallimont**

It is classic, it's awesome.

**Pete Sutherland**

I did part of the Money Musk flash mobs. I played Money Musk solo with no backup for 10 minutes. I played it with the Posse at Ralph Page for 18 minutes or whatever, it goes out there with a Posse-ization of it, that we all change instruments three times and people love to, what else? I was Bob McQuillen's fiddler at an earlier Ralph Page many years ago, [playing Money Musk on Saturday night](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mitt62MOaw). I've seen Money Musk from every angle. I love it.

**Julie Vallimont**

And there's also room in the tradition for other future Money Musks to be?

**Pete Sutherland**

Yeah, absolutely. I guess my that's my point.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, this has been so much fun. Thank you so much.

**Pete Sutherland**

For me too, I can't think of a better way to spend Saturday afternoon.

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