Contra Pulse Episode 21- Mary Lea

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Conta Pulse, this is Julie. This week we speak with violinist and violist Mary Lea. Classically trained from a musical family, Mary has been playing dance music professionally on the violin and viola since 1977. While her focus has been on contra, square, and English country dance music, she has also played extensively couple and quadrille music of the 19th and early 20th century, including polkas, waltzes, ragtime, tangos and blues. Intrigued by music of all kinds, Mary continues to explore repertoire from Europe and South America.

Within a year of moving to Boston in 1977, Mary joined two local bands. Yankee Ingenuity was a contra band that played at festivals, dances and camps throughout the U.S. and in England and represented the best of New England square and contra dance music and calling. Her other band is Bare Necessities, a quartet known here and abroad as the benchmark of English country dance music.

Now living in Brattleboro VT, Mary has also branched out to play with other groups over the years: Wild Asparagus (contras), Orient Express (international dance music), BLT (many kinds of music), MGM (English country dance), Dark Carnival and Crazy Quilt (all kinds of music) and Paradiso (music from Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and France). She was also a member of the large eclectic string ensemble Childsplay.

Mary teaches private lessons, plays for dances, private events such as weddings and concerts, organizes concerts and dance weeks, plus teaches and plays at dance and music weeks throughout the country.

In this interview, we talk about how Mary started playing for folk music and her roots in the Boston Contra scene, some of the different styles of dance that she plays for including Contra’s, English, and squares, and the days of the legendary Yankee ingenuity dance in Concord Massachusetts. She talks about her approaches as a dance fiddler and how she likes to treat improvisation and variation. She also shares her favorite things about different kinds of rhythm players, guitar versus piano, and the nuts and bolts of playing for Contra dances, such as medleys, arrangements are whether those things are important or not. She shares her perspective on the musical scene as someone who booked the bands for the Brattleboro Dawn dance for many years. And we delve into some of the many other music styles that she plays for.

This interview was one of the last ones that I did on my porch before winter, and it turned out that it was pouring rain. Apologies if that affected the sound quality, but like stalwart Yankees, we carried on with the interview anyway. Hope you enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well hello, Mary Lea, welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Mary Lea**

Hello, Julie Vallimont, and thank you for having me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, I'm so happy to have you here. Today it's raining, folks might have noticed. It's that kind of October rain that just doesn't stop, it's been raining like this all day but the colors outside are amazing. I do feel like the colors are often brighter on rainy days.

**Mary Lea**

I agree.

**Julie Vallimont**

It would be a good day to sit out here and paint.

**Mary Lea**

I was just doing that inside.

**Julie Vallimont**

Really? What were you painting?

**Mary Lea**

I was painting an apple. I picked a lot of apples off the ground yesterday, and I was just trying to match the colors, because they were drops from along Butterfield Road in Marlboro. Wild apples.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, cool. Are they small?

**Mary Lea**

Actually, not necessarily. There's some that are a good size and bright beautiful dark red, almost alizarin color, with white creamy inside, not sure what the variety is.

**Julie Vallimont**

This is the kind of weather that makes me want to contra dance.

**Mary Lea**

Sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Cold and rainy. We're all wearing bundled clothing. Do you want to do a little birding here?

**Mary Lea**

There's a little wren.... Tweet, tweet tweet.

**Julie Vallimont**

Normally, we just get, like, European sparrows and other birds here. But once in a while we get fun things like woodpeckers and... the hummingbirds are all gone, now. House wrens, lovely. Well, where shall we begin? Would you like to talk about how you started playing music and how you ended up playing for contra dances?

**Mary Lea**

Sure. I mean, the easiest thing to say is that I had no choice about playing music because my mother was a pianist and my father was the son of a pianist, so music was in my destiny. I started violin actually at eight, we had a program at school and I did that. At the age of nine, I started piano. From then on, it was music, orchestras, classical music, things like that all through high school. I played in college because I went to Oberlin and played for a couple years there. I got into Gilbert and Sullivan. I got into the more orchestral... it slightly veered off classical music and got into more theatrical music. I went off to the Peace Corps and did other things. When I came back, I got back into music in Amherst, but I was living in the Valley then. I was in Leverett, when I say the Valley, I say Connecticut River Valley. That was when I finally settled down. It was really like the beginning of 1971 to '77 that I lived there. So I knew David Kaynor and I knew people were starting to contra dance. I was living in a group house and one of my housemates got a call from somebody, I think it was 1976, from somebody in Northampton saying there was a desire for a contra dance among the women's union in Northampton, and they wanted a women's band, and did she want to play. I overheard that conversation and I said, me too. [The two of us then joined five other women actually](https://www.btstack.com/Ladies%20Chain.html), went down to Northampton and started rehearsing for this contra dance. So that was, like, the first time I ever took a tune like Coleraine, I remember that very well, wrote out a harmony for that, because of course, I could do that on the piano and figure out what would be nice for two fiddles, because there were two of us who played fiddle in the group. And anyway, that evolved, because that summer — I had been to Cape Breton the summer before — I took the whole band up to Cape Breton and got introduced to Cape Breton music. I mean, I introduced them to Cape Breton music. And that band was called Ladies Chain and we lasted for about three years.

I would say we were long on process and short on product, but we had a great time, and we played all over. We played at the [Guiding Star] Grange [in Greenfield, MA] and we played here in Brattleboro, we played at Chelsea House, played at McCusker's over in Buckland [MA] and down in Northampton. In 1977, I actually had moved to Boston and was introduced to the dancing and the playing there and got my first gig with Tod Whittemore in 1978 when he said, I have gone down my list of musicians, of fiddlers and I haven't been able to find a fiddler. I knew he was at the bottom of his list. He asked me if I wanted to play in Newmarket, New Hampshire and I jumped on the chance of that, it was an outdoor event. That's when I first met Kate Barnes, who was playing bass then, and just loved that, and that put me on Tod's list to be hired for the Thursday night dances, and eventually I started playing a lot in Boston. It was right at the kind of the front wave of things. There was Andy Woolf, there was Allan Block [from New Jersey]. Rodney Miller, people who played. I joined right away, joined in with Yankee Ingenuity, right off the bat with Donna—at that time Donna Hinds, Donna Hébert—and Tony Parkes calling. So I was part of that band then for, like, 19 years. I kind of just stepped right into the middle of things.

**Julie Vallimont**

So that dance, the Yankee Ingenuity dance, was already kind of happening at that time when they asked you to join the band.

**Mary Lea**

I don't know how many years it had been going. It was great, because I think Donna had always wanted to have another fiddler, and that gave us opportunities to play in harmony, which she really liked. I love two fiddles. It was a great opportunity. I think because of my classical background—oh, and I also played viola. I played viola in an orchestra—and I always heard those interior, sort of the interior melodies, the interior harmonies, and so I think I found that a good fit.

**Julie Vallimont**

When I was a new dancer in Boston, the Yankee Ingenuity dance was the first dance I ever went to in Boston. I had gone to my first dance in Maine years before that, but then when I moved to Boston, I was like, oh, let's try contra dancing. That was the Monday night dance, and you were playing for it. I remember watching Kate play piano and all the tricks and games, and just watching Kate and Cal [Howard] up there on stage, giving each other funny glances like they're up to something.

**Mary Lea**

One of the nice attributes of that, too, was that we often had a guest musician. And as time went on and Donna moved into Northampton, moved away, so then we almost always had a guest musician, which really kind of forced my hand because as the main melody player I needed to know what people knew. I also needed to keep a list of the tunes. Otherwise, a caller says, well, I want jigs or something, and then you're, well, do you know this jig? Or do you know that jig? It's very problematic trying to come up with a medley with somebody you don't play with all the time. Somewhere along the line, and I think maybe this was just the way Donna thought about things, is to have three tunes, usually two or three tunes, for most contras — for square dances, maybe just one or maybe two. The other thing, too, was that Tony was an incredible caller to work for because he was also a musician. He was very particular about, I want hornpipes for this, or, I want an old time tune for this, or specific tunes, and so that really forced us to kind of keep—in a way—to keep either a mental or physical list of all these varieties of tunes. I want a French Canadian style, and so right away differentiating between the different styles of music.

I went down to—almost right away, in the late 70s—went down to Augusta Arts Heritage [in West Virginia], and also to Ashokan. So for the Augusta Arts Heritage I was introduced to old time. The first time I went there was three weeks of playing old time music. I then went down another time and worked with Pete Sutherland and another time working with Liz Carroll on Irish music, and I was introduced to all these different styles. I thought, well, I'm never gonna get really great in any one of them. But at least—because I think that's what you need to do, is really focus if you are—but I was just thinking, well, I'll lift my boat little by little and get better at each style. That was kind of how I approached it. That served well, I think, for contra dance, at least for the Yankee Ingenuity dances and what Tony wanted, which was some distinction, musical distinction, between what we were playing for different dances. And not all callers would do that.

**Julie Vallimont**

So that each dance has different kinds of tunes for it?

**Mary Lea**

Yeah, and a different character. That's a way he would craft the evening. So in a way, I kind of learned to craft an evening that way as well. If I were working with another caller, I wouldn't just do like three medleys in a row of Irish tunes. It's like, well, what's the characteristic of the dance? If there's a lot of balances, maybe I would do some really strongly phrased French Canadian tunes, or some old time tunes also have some really strong phrasing, and things like that. You know, do you want it driving? Or do you want it kind of marchy or some pretty, whatever? Sometimes some people would say, I want sort of a sexy tune. And I think, what's that? Can't translate that one too easily.

**Julie Vallimont**

Contra dancing is many things.

**Mary Lea**

And of course there was always Kate, whom I played with all those years and in so many different bands, that we began to have a sixth sense about, there's going to be a substitution chord coming up, or there's going to be a certain run, or a certain break, or something that would be dramatic that would happen. I was kind of always expecting to create more drama in a medley, maybe start off one way, but maybe end with a bit more pizzazz.

**Julie Vallimont**

How much of that was your role as the fiddler, or were you kind of riding the rhythm section's wave?

**Mary Lea**

I mean, I think it had to do with how I thought about the tunes, and how I knew I played them anyway, or that the band played them. Some tunes just felt a little bit more prosaic to begin with, and others just seemed to have a lot more inherent drama. That would be something that we might move towards in the course of the dance. Because when people are first dancing, they're not listening in the same way anyway, they're trying to get the dance down. So it made sense to build up. You do that, I mean I think musicians sort of learn to craft things that way.

**Julie Vallimont**

As you were talking, I was just also sort of reflecting that my thoughts about programming a night are usually to be like, okay, the caller gives us a dance card and then we pick the genre of tunes that fit that card. So we'll play French Canadian tunes, and then Irish and then old time and why do I do it that way? I don't know. That's how I learned from the people I was playing with. It doesn't have to be that way, there might be a time when you would just play all New England tunes for a whole night.

**Mary Lea**

That's true, or you would have bands, at least in the Boston area, that played old time tunes. And so, for better for worse there was a certain sameness to it. I really attribute a lot to having worked with Yankee Ingenuity and maybe Tony in particular, because he wrote out a program. And the first group might be New England reels, the second one might be a set of jigs, the third, maybe with a certain flavor, the third would be hornpipes or something like that, or he'd do a circle mixer. So he had really clear ideas of what he wanted musically.

**Julie Vallimont**

I enjoyed that. I enjoy that aesthetic now, that's my go-to aesthetic when I'm matching tunes and dances, I just inherited it without thinking about it. You can hear contra bands, like Tidal Wave, who will play music from Quebec all night, or old time bands, or Irish rooted bands who play Irish tunes all night. But then there's this other very kind of New England contra dance thing to do, which is to mix up all these different genres of tunes and match them to dances because each of these genres of tunes has their own character. And like you're saying, some of them have long, lyrical phrases, some of them short, more staccato phrases, some of them naturally have a little more drive, or a little more lilt. And you can use that.

**Mary Lea**

When I was called on to direct a musicians' course at Pinewoods, I thought a lot about that and really kind of worked with the musicians who were there on just those issues. Somebody would play a tune and I'd say, well, what are the characteristics of that? I mean, what else might you put with it? Some people would think...that they would put something very different with it, or others would think, well, let's, let's have this whole medley have a certain character, rather than just making it jumpy within one dance. And so really, I thought a lot about that. And, when I wrote my list of tunes, they were not only by key, they were also by genre. So I'd have all these Québécois tunes and I would have them by key, and then I would also have the southern tunes and do the same thing. It just became standard fare for me anyway.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you still have a copy of that Yankee Ingenuity tune list from back in the day?

**Mary Lea**

[I do, I have it right here](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Mary-Lea-Tune-List.pdf).

**Julie Vallimont**

You have it with you? Amazing!

**Mary Lea**

I was thinking, I still use it. I was playing some old time tunes with somebody up in Putney just recently and this was really a help. Because one of the things that again I would talk with musicians about is, what's your filing system? What's your mental filing system? I realized, for me, it's often: I need to know the key and I need to remember the first beginning notes. Knowing the name really helps me a lot because I think a lot of these tunes are filed away by name and key and beginning phrase. How are they for you?

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm a piano player.

**Mary Lea**

So you don't have to worry as much.

**Julie Vallimont**

Although I do keep the tune list for Buddy System, because Noah is not a tune-list-keeping kind of fiddler. I internalize them somehow, or I memorize them. But often, you can just write down the first three letters of the tune and that's often just enough to grab it. I've seen people write like DCA or whatever the first few letters are, I've seen other people draw a little tiny music staff with two bars of the tune. Well, what's your system?

**Mary Lea**

I don't have that. It's really what I said, it's just by key, by genre and the name. It doesn't mean that I will... now, because it's been a while since I've played a lot of contra... I don't play that much contra anymore. Then there's books, so I find like the Portland Collection or something like that is really good, even though I don't play the tune the way it is in a book. It can give me the landscape, you know, that's the other thing, seeing the way the tune is laid out.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's the interesting thing about the Portland Collections is that they use the version that was submitted to them, which is what makes sense. I can't imagine doing it any other way. But of course, for all these tunes there's many different versions floating around, some of which are regional.

**Mary Lea**

Exactly, the Seattle group, or the Northwest group, rather.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. And in the Midwest, I've heard different versions of tunes, and there's New England versions of tunes, which makes sense. It's great to treat the Portland collections as a collection, but it's not a definitive "this is how the tune goes."

**Mary Lea**

The one thing that she [Sue Songer] did that's so good is that she made a discography. So in the back she has an attribute to who gave her the tune, and then can also direct you to maybe listen to a CD that has it on it, or some recording.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because even the process of writing out a tune is........

**Mary Lea**

Simplifying, it's a skeleton.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, exactly. Like, you really go back and listen to the recording of these tunes and say, you're learning a tune from a particular fiddler, they'll play the tune four times, they won't play it the same way all four times.

**Mary Lea**

Nor do you want them to.

**Julie Vallimont**

So which one is the "right" one that you put in the book, you know? And that's why they're great tools, and there's just this wonderful diversity out there.

**Mary Lea**

I think that's the hardest thing for people is to get off the written page that way and then make the tune their own. One of the first things I learned... the very first workshop that I went to was the old time workshop down in Elkins, West Virginia. There was this guy, J.P. Fraley, who came, and he was an old timer and he listened to all these recordings at that time. There was a lot on the radio. Then he'd just turn it off and remember the tune the best he could and kind of make his own version of it. His main message to us was, Make the tune your own. That was something I needed to hear right there at the beginning of this whole event, this whole episode in my life, which has been going on for 42 years.

**Julie Vallimont**

A good chapter. Yeah, Make it your own. That's important, otherwise, it won't sound right. So when you take a tune and play it and make it your own what does that end up meaning? What kind of aspects of your fiddle style do you bring to tunes like this?

**Mary Lea**

Well, I'm sure that's changed. I love to make variations and to improvise to some extent, but I'm not a wild improviser the way some people I know are. Usually, if it's a good tune, and I like it, I really want that to shine out, shine forth, I should say. There'll be just variations in it, it could be changing the octave, it can be just adding more notes, it can be making breaks in it, things like that, but I think it's just making variations in the tune. And sometimes it can be going into the minor if it's a major tune, just playing with it, being playful. I was going to say that that's the thing that I liked the best about playing singing squares, because there is that swingy improvisational aspect to it. I love the coloration of it, I love playing against the voice and backing up a voice... not imposing myself over the top of it, but just playing around the edges of it, and things like that. [I REALLY love playing for squares](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8L0zDJI_AM) and singing squares, especially.

**Julie Vallimont**

They're so much fun. Well, it's funny, that's one of the things I really noticed about the Yankee Ingenuity vibe that I took it for granted, because it was the first regular dance I really went to that had the same band over and over again. It was a swingier kind of groove than a lot of bands have now, and you play rags and things like that. [Mary added later that she absolutely loves playing these.] So much fun. Something about that groove... like, the hall changes because people don't take the dance very seriously, people start talking more.

**Mary Lea**

Is that right? That's funny.

**Julie Vallimont**

That groove, it changes the whole feel in the hall. A lot of bands these days don't play rags and that's fine. It's a certain fiddle style that not all fiddlers want to do or are good at, and you need the right backup player. Like DADGAD guitar being popular doesn't always lend itself to ragtime.

**Mary Lea**

I'm so spoiled for piano, I think. It's a massively, very... potentially varied instrument and you're right, that it's giving almost... like a jazzy interpretation with ragtime. For me, I guess the word is playful, and I feel that with some of the French Canadian tunes as well. There's something in the chord changes, that I go, oooooh, I can hear some things to do in that, as a result of maybe these other... [chords that are] not I, IV, or V chords. You're doing, to me, much more interesting chord changes and whatever, that's part of it and also stride piano or bass lines or... I don't know.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's more fodder there for you to improvise with and play around with. It's not minimalist in that sense.

**Mary Lea**

But I will say that with a good DADGAD player, that sometimes I feel very grounded because the rhythm is so solid, and some of the improvisation is almost easier. It's not like I fall into the abyss, or whatever. So there's something for both, it's really fun to be able to play both ways, I think, but the piano is a far more versatile instrument in the right hands.

**Julie Vallimont**

For dance backup, you can do a lot of different kind of things. I love DADGAD guitars, don't anyone get me wrong, even though I've been pretty piano-centric in this podcast so far, just because I'm biased and also because of its long history in New England, and because of the number of different kinds of roles they can play for a dance. There's just something about the piano that's, like, part of the dance hall. If you go into a hall like the [Concord, MA] Scout House, and that piano's sitting up there on that stage... it has a presence.

**Mary Lea**

It's true. It's so traditional, too, I mean, it's like piano and fiddle, you don't need anything more.

**Julie Vallimont**

But I do love DADGAD guitar, and the way it really, like, sets the tune beautifully because it can be such a beautiful, simple, stable accompaniment for the tune.

**Mary Lea**

And I especially love it for Irish music. I have to say, that it can give so much drive, and also lyricism, too.

**Julie Vallimont**

I feel like any traditions that have pipes in them... I feel like DADGAD works especially well for because of its droning quality.

**Mary Lea**

Oh yeah, that's interesting, I've never played with pipes, so I wouldn't know that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I just love like, if you're listening to a pipe tune, or a tune being played on pipes, whether they're Highland pipes or uilleann pipes or border pipes or whatever, and I'm not a piper, please, if you have thoughts about piping, everyone, please write into me, I'd love to know them. When you have a drone, whether it's a tonic or the fifth or whatever note you're droning at, the melody almost becomes like a graph. moving up and down for me. In the X-axis is the tonic, the root note, and then the tune has these beautiful landscapes of moving up and down. It has these moments of tension with the tonic or whatever the drone note is, and moments of resolution with a drone note. I love those moments, and that's a different kind of harmonic motion than when you change the chord every time the tune changes a note. If you're chording a tune, and there's a note that might be a tension, you change chords to the right chord.

**Mary Lea**

But I know pianists who don't do that, Mary Cay [Brass] doesn't, nor does Kate, and I'm sure you don't either. It's like... you ride that A7 chord through the entire B part and don't resolve it for a long time. I know, it's a great point of tension potential.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or just playing a I chord, I would happily play a I chord three times through a dance and let the tune have its moments... some tunes that's not satisfying, I think that they need chords, but I feel a lot of those are more modern tunes. A lot of older tunes, they don't need it in the same way.

**Mary Lea**

Sometimes the less chord changes the better. I know that that's the way Kate feels. You always come back to something like Forked Deer, do you go into the A on the second part and just hang out there for a long time? But there's a lot you can do with a with a good old D tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot you can do. The thing I remember about the Yankee Ingenuity dance is not a lot of arrangements of very fun — and please correct me, this is like the lead-in to asking you about this — is that I imagine you all having fun and it being about the interplay, and people like Jack [O'Connor] would take a mandolin solo. Then you'd have different fiddle moments and harmonies, and then there'd be a rhythm break where Kate and Cal would stop playing and take out the bass and piano. Was that kind of your philosophy, essentially, as a band?

**Mary Lea**

I think so. And you know, I didn't really encounter arrangements per se, until I played with Wild Asparagus for a few years, where things were much more prescriptive that way. I mean, still exciting. But it's just like I knew, I think that there were there were there were plans about how you're going to approach maybe a change or things like that or how you were starting off. Almost everything in Yankee Ingenuity was done on the fly. Sometimes we agreed, just stay out for a couple of rounds and just let the fiddles take it. There would be something like that, or there would be a way of starting off very quietly and building up, but it would just be decided at that time, just as a device. I was very aware of the fact that those are potential arrangements, but then it was like sort of like with Bare Necessities, you let it organically evolve.

**Julie Vallimont**

You can start with these ideas of what you want to do, but then you just let it go wherever it's gonna go. Are these conversations you'd have while the caller is doing the walkthrough and you're picking tunes, saying okay, we'll start it this way and then we'll change to this, or...?

**Mary Lea**

There might be certain tunes, you know, I was thinking like La Grondeuse. [sings the tune] It's a very percussive tune, and it sounds really great with just a single fiddle or two fiddles and feet, if somebody can do that, or rhythm instrument if you don't have somebody doing stepping. And so it might be something that I would choose for that moment because I know I do it with that. That wouldn't necessarily work with just any tunes. So it's how you've learned to work, or how you like to play certain tunes. And then those would be the ones you would choose at that moment that seems appropriate. You know what I mean?

**Julie Vallimont**

Would you keep your medleys together? Like would you be like, let's play this medley or would you make them on the fly?

**Mary Lea**

Generally on the fly because we would be playing with different people, and people might not know all the tunes anyway. I'm trying to think, I mean, there might be ones we enjoyed grouping together, just because we'd like the change, like ending on a high F and then going to an F# and starting the next tune. Just something that was particularly appealing. But that again was different with Wild Asparagus. The tune combination would be worked out ahead of time and would be rehearsed. And of course, we never had rehearsals. We only had rehearsals with Yankee Ingenuity when we were getting ready for a recording.

**Julie Vallimont**

[Heatin' up the Hall](https://www.discogs.com/Yankee-Ingenuity-Heatin-Up-The-Hall/release/11155884), fun album. What was that process like recording that?

**Mary Lea**

Well, it was so long ago. I mean, any time playing with Ruthie Dornfeld, for me, was a special treat. She and I would get together and work out harmonies and some things that we wanted to do. She played almost... once a month, I think, with Yankee Ingenuity anyway, so we had a lot of time to play together, and I also got together with her and played tunes. I guess we must have rehearsed. I have no memory of that, particularly. Oh, man, that's probably like, almost 30 years ago. I can't remember when that one came out, in '91 or something like that. [The album came out in 1989.] I just I don't know, a long time. I remember Laurie Indenbaum saying people shouldn't be allowed to have so much fun when they're playing. I realized that we were playing everything at a bristling tempo but it was just so ebullient.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love arrangements as much as the next person, but the number one quality I want in good dance music is that irresistible energy and that sense of fun.

**Mary Lea**

And spontaneity.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, exactly. That's what you want to have on the dance floor, it inspires you to be fun and spontaneous on the dance floor. I had a lot of good years with that dance. Well, and, talk about playing with the same group for 18+ years. You have to try new things, like [Kate and I were talking about how boredom is the father of invention](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-9-kate-barnes/).

**Mary Lea**

Or the mother, we're not sure which. That's true. But then the other thing too, both Kate and I also played in other groups, but I did do, you know, a whole bunch of different groups, you know, like BLT, you know, playing with Bill [Tomczak], and Crazy Quilt was with [Peter Siegel](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-15-peter-siegel/) and [Anna Patton](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-5-anna-patton/), when I was living here [Brattleboro, Vermont], with Dark Carnival with Lise Brown, all these different groupings of people, and each one sort of had different strengths. It made it really interesting to play, I think. I was grateful for that. And also that I played other kinds of music too, so it wasn't just contra.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you've been obviously playing for English country dance for a while.

**Mary Lea**

And then the vintage dancing too, because that started off really quite early.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you had some solo projects that are exploring other styles of music. Would you like to talk about those a little bit?

**Mary Lea**

Sure. I would say that one of the biggest contributors to that was Ruthie, because she was constantly seeming to appear with tunes from different traditions. You know, like some Brazilian tunes, these Venezuelan waltzes that came via Morten Høirup's father from Denmark that brought this 12 wonderful Venezuelan waltzes to our attention, and then things with... The other big factor was working doing v[intage dance music with Richard Powers when BLT played](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfwzZGZLKIw). We went every summer for a number of years playing in Cincinnati for a dance week there where they were doing vintage dance. So that was 19th century, early 20th century music that included tangos and ragtime and of course mazurkas and other stuff, different kinds of waltzes from the 19th century and so on. And so you know, the first recording was based on two things, was based on the pieces that Bill and Kate and I were playing for Richard Powers, and the fact that Kate had put out this huge volume of what she called "A Little Couple-Dancemusik"—four hundred tunes with 170 waltzes in there. I drew, maybe, most of the pieces that is in that first album from that volume and was born out of that.

Bill and Kate and I were the featured core of most of that album, but then it included other people as well. But for every, I think, nine out of the 15 of those had Bill and Kate and I as the core band. But then the others included people I knew... like David Cantieni and Mary Cay [Brass] and Ralph Gordon played on all of it, played bass, and these different beautiful melody instruments. Ruthie and I did a bunch on that. The other two albums were a little later on. They incorporated again all these couple dances; I just love playing couple dance music. Kate and I played a lot for the waltz events. Really, the vintage dancing went on for quite a while and Ruthie was around too for a good part of that, and some other pieces came via her or via other people. That's how that happened.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you travel for the vintage dance events?

**Mary Lea**

Mostly to Cincinnati, but the first event was actually at Pinewoods when the Folk Arts Center, Marianne Taylor, had gotten BLT together to play a contra/international dance combination. Then that summer, she had Richard Powers and his wife, Melanie Cougarstar, come to teach vintage dance. That was the first time that I think they were invited, and we were the band for that week. We were introduced suddenly to all this incredible, wonderful, interesting music. You did have to be able to read [music], because most of it was written, and that would have eliminated some of the dance musicians that didn't have a classical background, I think.

**Julie Vallimont**

Being able to sight-read quickly is especially valuable when you're in a long event where you're playing lots of different kinds of music and you need to have a really deep repertoire at your fingertips, and the odds that everyone in the group knows all the same tunes, so very slim. We would always do this thing where we would have, like, one person who definitely knows it and can kind of hold it down, and then everyone else is sight-reading or.......

**Mary Lea**

We would have to woodshed as much as possible. Sometimes with Richard you wouldn't necessarily get the music until you got there, but you'd just have to find some time to play it over or sight-read it. He was a musician, too, so he could help us out with that; he's a pianist.

**Julie Vallimont**

So he could give you a sense of the tempos?

**Mary Lea**

Oh, he's very persnickety about that, in a good way. I mean, when people are leaping in the air, they can't leap endlessly. The timing has to be pretty... make sense.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it really makes a difference. Do any of those styles crossover into your contra playing? Do they change the way you play for contra dances?

**Mary Lea**

Well, it's interesting that you should ask. I was just thinking one of the things that I listened to recently, I was playing for somebody because I've been playing [this Brazilian choro music, chorinho music](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choro), and one of the pieces called is Brasileirinho, and it's a very famous choro piece that all the choro players would know, but [I was playing it at the Ann Arbor Dawn Dance](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7kKBKx1fPw). I was there actually to do English in place of Daron [Douglas], who couldn't come.

**Julie Vallimont**

Daron Douglas?

**Mary Lea**

Yeah, I was playing with Paul Oorts and David Wiesler, and then Naomi [Morse] was there with Jeremiah [McLane]. And who was the sixth person that.... probably a bass player. I'm just trying to remember who was the sixth player was, but they were there as the contra band. oh, I know, Owen.

**Julie Vallimont**

Owen Morrison? So it was probably, like, a version of Nightwatch, maybe, but with Jeremiah instead of Elvie [Miller]?

**Mary Lea**

Right. That's exactly it. Naomi and I had learned that for one of the [Childsplay](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glI1pKoUDxk) concerts, we had played this... Brasileirinho there together. And so I knew she knew that, Jeremiah knew it, and both Paul and David did, and Owen. So there we were, and it was, like the last dance of the evening. It is such a crashing tune, it's a 64-bar tune that is so much fun to play. And you know that...Tico Tico No Fuba which, you know, [sings], that's another good one, that's sort of like doing a rag. It has raggy elements, because it's in the same era but Brazilian. And so it's got the potential to be fun that way.

**Julie Vallimont**

How did the dancers respond to it?

**Mary Lea**

Oh, great. Oh, yeah, they start moving differently, just the way they do with a rag. I know what you mean is sort of like they loosen up and more parts of their body start moving.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It's like they forgot they had those parts of their bodies.

**Mary Lea**

Yeah, it's really fun, it is fun to watch that. I mean just the way it is when you do a very slinky tune and people start getting down low and hunker down, or you play a tango or something and they start to do this classic arm up front, you do a tango or... a swingy tune like, "Bei Mir Bist Du Schön" or something like that. It makes people throw in a few extra twirls and whatever.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you were learning traditional fiddle music, who were your fiddle teachers and inspirations?

**Mary Lea**

Well, I think Donna was one. I mean, she was a great a great Québécois player. Ruthie surpassed them all, though, and I think it's partly because she just has this incredible rhythm and coloration and drive and variety. I mean, it was always so elusive to me, but I was always inspired. Rodney definitely, too, because I heard him a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you ever play with him?

**Mary Lea**

Maybe, probably we wound up at some places together. But I don't have so much a memory of that. And he wasn't in Boston the way Ruthie was, so she was somebody I would see. And she was just a friend, so that meant a lot. I was trying to think who else? I mean, she was the most, again. Andy Woolf too, I don't know if you ever knew him, but he played old time. A very funny guy and also very inventive. When he would come to play, his one strength was... he could make up gibberish.

**Julie Vallimont**

Musical or verbal?

**Mary Lea**

Verbal, he was a chameleon. He could he could sing Hawaiian music. I mean, sing Hawaiian, although he didn't speak it, but he knew the 13 letters of the alphabet, and he could sing in those 13 letters. He could sing a Spanish-sounding thing. So we'd play these Venezuelan waltzes together, and then he would start singing a song that sounded like Spanish and people would come up and say, I didn't know that had words to it, what are you singing? He was just such a stitch, and he'd do Russian the same way, so if we were playing Metsäkukkia or something that sounded very Russian, he would make it sound Russian. Very inspirational player, quite good, although I didn't necessarily aspire to play like him, but I think he was very influential. Just his approach was fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

That can be very inspiring.

**Mary Lea**

I think fun is an important ingredient. THE important ingredient.

**Julie Vallimont**

I know, it's kind of easy to forget that when I'm doing these interviews sitting on the porch, because we're not dancing and we're talking about dancing, which is really meta and weird. The best way to learn about dance music is to sit at dances and record it and talk to people about it, but we can't do that right now. These memories bring back that sense of fun, and whimsy, and it's really nice. I would love to go dancing on a cold fall day like this.

**Mary Lea**

Yes, inside, where it's warm and cozy.

**Julie Vallimont**

And disgustingly humid inside.

**Julie Vallimont**

All the windows at the Scout House would be all fogged up. They would have to tape off the entrance so that people wouldn't walk across the floor with their wet shoes. You'd have to go down the side of the hall and around on the carpet and take off your shoes, but that just added to the magic. The fact that you have to work for it a little bit more to get to the dance just made it a little bit more fun. You're just so glad to see other people and be in a warm room. So many times I remember opening the doors and just feeling that blast of damp heat that's hitting you in the face.

**Mary Lea**

As long as it doesn't come with the smell of a gym.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well that's the smell of the dancers. Speaking of smells of gyms, you were an organizer of the [Brattleboro Dawn Dance](http://dawndance.org/about/history/) for quite some time. What was that like?

**Mary Lea**

Well, actually I realize that I was always helping organize because there were events in Boston as well. There was one that was raising money for dance musicians, so it was a dance musicians' fund. That was one dance that I organized for, and then also a composers' dance. For about four or five years, we would run these composers’ dances and people would send in a gazillion tunes. It started off small, but there would be maybe, like, 100 tunes that we would have to wade through. I'll tell you, that is challenging, because you have to get to play them well enough so that you can decide whether you like them or not. If you're just sort of sight reading them, it doesn't flow. Anyway, that was happening in Boston. Then when I moved here, the Dawn Dance was a great big committee. It was like all kinds of friends from town. Although it never seemed like we had enough people, because there's a lot to do for a Dawn Dance. It was challenging. I was the person who booked it. When I took that over, then my job was mostly that. I had to book eight bands and because it was also English in the afternoon, but three contra dance bands each twice a year and callers, and then try to get the numbers of bands, I always had to have at least one, maybe two bands of piano. That's my bent.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love that you would always do that.

**Mary Lea**

I was very conscious of the female/male gender balance issue. If I were looking at other events elsewhere, and I would see that they [the bands] were all guys, I would just say how can they do that? There's so many good women musicians. [Mary emailed afterwards to say, "I can’t believe what I forgot to mention when talking about the Dawn Dance and the wonderful bands that have come through there (and Pinewoods). Ironically, most of them are NE Bands and should have been on the tip of my tongue:  Elixir, Nor’easter, Clayfoot Strutters, Anadama, Great Bear Trio, Greenfield [Dance] Band, Perpetual e-Motion. I wanted to speak to the merits of the different sized bands. Elixir, Clayfoot Strutters, Wild Asparagus all had the advantage of more timbres and the interest they can bring to dances when used well. They are all really enjoyable bands for me to listen to; I never tire of them. But then you have your band, Nor'easter, Great Bear Trio, Nightingale, with really exceptional musicians playing so well together and coming up with excellent arrangements that made people stop and listen. Anadama does well too with driving rhythm, but I personally like what the piano does for a smaller ensemble, expanding the sound and generally providing more dynamic range and variety of settings for the different medleys. Those are my personal biases since I listen to the music a lot even when dancing. And of course Perpetual e-Motion does have a lot of variety for a two-person band. I enjoyed them for a change of pace, but I’d never care for electronic devices to replace actual instruments."]

**Mary Lea**

But yeah, getting the right balance, getting the right number of musicians so that the [payment] shares would be large enough, so it got to be bands with at least three, probably three. And if it was a big band like Wild Asparagus, which draws a lot of people, you drew a lot of people. That would have five or six people and then I'd have to have smaller bands around that. The plan was to have a more traditional sounding one for the first four hours, and then middle shift would have kind of a wild card element to it. That's what made somebody like [the Latter Day] Lizards really good, or things with the VanNorstrands, or whatever. The early morning could just be really a kind of a groove band in a way, because you wanted to just be able to have the caller not waste a lot of time on calling, and not do complicated dances, but they had to sort of call and then get out of the way and just let the music ride people through the morning. So it was really interesting. It got harder as time went on, because all these dances have their ebb and flow. When you hit the ebb part and not as many people are coming because there's a lot of other dances to go to, then it's a challenge to say, "Can you come and play? But it might not be very much money" and things like that. Then there was also the cooking issue, that was a very challenging thing, having food during the night and having that be worth somebody's while to come in and offer that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Especially now that I live in Brattleboro, I know that there is nowhere to get food after 9 p.m., except maybe a pizza. But people dancing all night, contra dancers are notorious for eating large amounts of food and constantly eating.

**Mary Lea**

Well, except that what happened is that as more younger dancers came, they brought their food. So they weren't interested in spending the money for that. It was really older dancers that would have the discretionary funds to pay for that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Pay for the vending.

**Mary Lea**

I mean, it's understandable.

**Julie Vallimont**

What years do you think were the heyday? Like the biggest years of the Dawn Dance?

**Mary Lea**

Oh, my God, I don't know.

**Julie Vallimont**

There may be a lot of them.

**Mary Lea**

There could have been. When it first started, there were like, four in the year.

**Julie Vallimont**

Really? Wow.

**Mary Lea**

When it first started with Michael McKernan and I don't know, Applejack, maybe. I don't have the history of that down in my head, actually. [The history of the Brattleboro Dawn Dance is online here.] I think when contras were starting to flourish and before a lot of other dance events opened up was probably the biggest time for Brattleboro Dawn Dance. At some point everybody started cashing in, saying, hey, we should have our own events, and so people didn't have to travel as far. There were certain bands like Nightingale or Wild Asparagus, of course, thinking of local bands, that whenever they came would—or something with Mary Cay and Rodney or you know, Airplang, or something like that, thinking back in that era—would draw big groups.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think there's been a trend, like other organizers have pointed out in the last few years, there's been a lot more all-day dance events, like various kinds of contra-thons or three-band events or you know, Steve Zakon-Anderson has his ball series, the Fall Ball and the Play Ball and the Snow Ball, and he was saying that numbers go down because now there's a lot more events like that. You can find all-day dancing at the Greenfield [Guiding Star] Grange once in a while for special events. You can find it in Peterborough, you can go to the Dawn Dance. They do them in Portland, Maine, sometimes now, they have it in DC, they started one in Boston. They were also doing... in Amherst for a while, they were doing Contra Evolution for a few years, which was like electronic music and things like Perpetual e-Motion. And it's wonderful, what an amazing diversity, except that we have to recruit dancers fast enough to be able to go to all these events and not water down the whole dancing. I don't think anyone is trying to compete with anyone else. We just all want to have fun and organize events, but if you're drawing from the same pool of dancers, your calendar gets very full. Can't do everything.

**Mary Lea**

That's right, and then there's attrition. There was something even that changed a lot in the course of Yankee Ingenuity, which was that the Thursday night dance, which moved to the Scout House, drew off Tod's dance, which was at the VFW in Cambridge, drew off people [from the Monday night dance] to that. Monday night went through some evolutions. I think, in some ways, some of the dances got to be...maybe more what people have characterized as "urban." People came for the exercise, they wanted to keep moving the whole time. Then there are some of the smaller dances, and in a way maybe Yankee Ingenuity, Scout House used to be that, they were more community-based. And so you came to be with your friends. I mean, it's always that, and then there was the generational thing that started to happen too. Some of the older dancers seemed to feel a little bit expendable, not connecting always with the younger dancers. Definitely lots of changes, understandably.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that feeling of being expendable, and not being connected to the dance can come from a few different ways. It can come from just the dancers not asking you to dance, younger dancers.

**Mary Lea**

That's right.

**Julie Vallimont**

Especially at the Thursday dance in Boston, there was the fireplace set for a long time, which is literally a set of dancers who didn't want to dance anywhere else in the hall.

**Mary Lea**

That's when it moved to the Scout House; it was no longer at the VFW hall.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. And that... center set syndrome, or side set syndrome happens with a lot of different dances; it's certainly not unique to Boston. This is something we have to watch out for. But then also the music changing... when I was a new contra musician, I would have some older dancers come up to me and say that—I guess when I say older, I mean longtime dancers. You can be a young old dancer. They would say that they missed the slower tempos of the past, and perhaps that is mostly older dancers or people who are having a hard time moving around at such a fast tempo.

**Mary Lea**

They haven't yet moved over to English dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

They haven't crossed over.

**Mary Lea**

They haven't crossed over.

**Julie Vallimont**

You can get that kind of divide in the community a little bit, and then you start to lose that festive party spirit.

**Mary Lea**

I really stopped dancing so much. I think I like best, parties, like somebody's birthday party, or whatever, and it was a group of people who were a community of friends. I didn't really care what we danced. I must say I probably preferred squares; it's just you're dancing in that little set. As I say, I don't play contras so much anymore, just in the context of maybe a weekend event.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like if you're at a weekend that has other kinds of music as well?

**Mary Lea**

Mostly there as an English musician, but then there'll be some contra, and then I'll play that too.

**Julie Vallimont**

You're a great kind of musician to book for those things. I think organizers have a special list of people who play both contra and English for these kind of hybrid weekends, or if they want a mostly waltz kind of event, or couple dancing or whatever. So that versatility is really, really useful. The Yankee Ingenuity dance seemed to have a lot of changes over the years.

**Mary Lea**

When it would ebb particularly badly we'd do a questionnaire and have people say, what's the problem here? And of course, it's very sobering. You know, when you get the responses...

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of factors for sure. When the halls changed, when the Yankee Ingenuity dance was at the Scout House and had that feel, but then the VFW dance was at the VFW, so when they both were at the Scout House, then people could go to either one. I think that also changed the community feel a bit.

**Mary Lea**

Sure, because the VFW was closer to Cambridge, it would have been more of an in-town kind of event, Concord was outside of town.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are your favorite kinds of dance? Did you dance much as a dancer? What are your favorite bands to dance to back when you used to dance?

**Mary Lea**

There are a lot of bands that are fun to dance to for different reasons from over the years. I always liked Nightingale, because I think they were musicians' musicians, to me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Mary Lea**

A lot to listen to. I also go back to Wild Asparagus, I really enjoyed that a lot because they did a variety of tempos, and they crafted their dances. It was fun to hear all of the different things going on that way. The ones that I would hear at the all-night dances, the Brattleboro Dawn Dance, there wasn't a band I didn't like in there. And I really appreciated hearing some of the younger musicians coming along. Everybody had something different to offer... or at the Flurry, that'd be another place where you would hear the different groups play, so. But I didn't join in the fray, like at the Flurry with 400 other dancers in the dance hall, it just wasn't my thing. I'd rather go and talk with somebody who came from across the country and do that. I always loved your playing, you're a great musician. I think many of my favorite bands that I danced to are dated, that was from some time ago. Although I've heard many of the bands, as long as I was working at the Brattleboro Dawn Dance, I was always hearing new bands, so that was good.

**Julie Vallimont**

There have been some amazing bands that have come to the Dawn Dance over the years. I've had many wonderful moments of dancing back then I used to dance a lot. But some of my most memorable moments of dancing, were at the Dawn Dance. Especially in the early hours, one year Perpetual e-Motion played there, and that music just propelled us in the most amazing way. Bill Olson was calling and he just called this perfect balance-y dance that fit with the tune so perfectly, and it was just, it was bliss. There's been so many good bands at the Dawn Dance over the years.

**Mary Lea**

Did you ever hear Fresh Fish with Kerry Elkin, or Nat Hewitt's band, you know...?

**Julie Vallimont**

Like Rumblestrip?

**Mary Lea**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

I didn't get to dance to Kerry very much. I did dance to Nat for a few years and all of Larry Unger's various bands and Amy Larkin...

**Mary Lea**

Oh, yeah, Eden. Notorious.

**Julie Vallimont**

Really good stuff. Then you somehow spent some time playing with Childsplay?

**Mary Lea**

Yeah, I was just gonna say, and Tidal Wave. Because any of the bands that Mary Cay played with, but there could be either specific fiddlers that I was drawn to, or specific pianists. And that would be, I mean, Rachel Aucoin's playing. I just have always found it totally energizing... and the same with Mary Cay, I mean full of drama, you know? And again, you, and then listening to [Audrey [Knuth]](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-16-audrey-knuth/) in the bands that she played with, the Free Raisins or something? I liked hearing them. Childsplay was a long... I was there for many years, early on, right from the beginning, almost the beginning, but not to the end. It conflicted with Bare Necessities.

**Julie Vallimont**

You spent many years traveling the country with Bare Necessities.

**Mary Lea**

Yeah, that's the longest span. I mean, we've been together since 1980.

**Julie Vallimont**

It seems like a silly question, but tell me if it's interesting or not? What to you are the biggest differences between playing for English country dance and contra dancing?

**Mary Lea**

One of them is the dynamic that when you're playing for English, you the musician do not choose the tune. It's chosen by the caller. So it means that you're not fighting with each other. I remember that, it's like, okay, who gets to play to their strengths on this one? Well, I don't play that so well, but if you really want to do it, go ahead. But then there’s that, that's an important element. Second thing is that we all have to be able to read the music because, I was just looking at the number of tunes in each of those books that Kate Barnes has done. There's altogether about 1100 or 1200 tunes that have dances for them. And as you know, each dance almost invariably has its own tune. So that's another major difference, and so you're playing from a lead sheet of maybe 1200 tunes, you could be playing any one of those.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's too large a repertoire to memorize.

**Mary Lea**

Oh, for me it is. Jacqueline [Schwab] has a lot of it memorized. So that's another thing. I think one of the things that Bare Necessities brought into the mix for English was being kind of creative with it, and coming up with counter-melodies and harmonies, and so that's something that we just expect to do now. And then you're also playing to the dance, as you are with contra, but there's maybe more variety in the kind of dancing with English. Certainly more formations... two couple, three couple, four couple sets, circles, long lines, triple minors. I mean, you're just like this whole range of ways and then playing in almost every key. So you know, you don't do that with contra.

**Julie Vallimont**

Flat keys.

**Mary Lea**

You don't play in C minor, very often.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love black keys on the piano. I don't know if it's all those years I spent playing Chopin Nocturnes as a kid, but I just love black keys.

**Mary Lea**

They have a certain sound, don't they?

**Julie Vallimont**

They do. Yeah, I've often talked about this with people. Everyone's brains perceive music differently. But to me, if I were playing in D♭, it would sound different to me than a piece in C#.

**Mary Lea**

Oh that's interesting, sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Which doesn't make any sense because they're enharmonic, they're the exact same notes. But somehow, I don't know if it's the kind of material, if you think about Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C# minor versus a beautiful Chopin Nocturne in D♭. I don't know if it's just the music, but for some reason for me, if I'm thinking about it as sharps, it sounds different than in flats. I've never found what the basis for that is.

**Mary Lea**

That's very interesting, but I could see how I would think that too, and it could be something that has no bearing in reality, really, but more in just, like, a perceptual thing, like something that's sharp is going to just feel brighter. Whether it is or not, I don't know.

**Julie Vallimont**

Whether it's associations with the kind of instruments that play it, like you hear a lot more fiddles in sharp keys, like A and D and G. Or if it's the kind of repertoire that's written for it, or the kind of chord voicings that are being used in that repertoire. I have perfect pitch. Some people are like "You have perfect pitch!" I'm not bragging about it, sometimes it's the biggest liability. It's really a pain.

**Mary Lea**

I remember lydia [ievins] says that, too. It's like, what do you do when the piano was off a pitch? Or you're playing with somebody who's not on pitch.

**Julie Vallimont**

I've been there before. This is another story for another time, but I played my grandmother's funeral because I was a church organist. They asked me to play, and it was in Pennsylvania and in a chapel I'd never been to. As an organist, you do this all the time. That's what prepared me for being a contra dance pianist is all these years as an organist, because you walk up to an instrument you've never played before and you have to perform on it right then. And it was Amazing Grace, that's like, easy. That's like, the bread and butter of organist music. We started playing it, and the organ was three steps sharp.

**Mary Lea**

Oh, my God.

**Julie Vallimont**

I guess the person who was a regular organist had transposed it somehow to make it easier to sing with the choir. I could not read the music. It was making my brain explode because when I play, I hear the note in my head that is written on the sheet music already, even if I don't play it, I hear it just by reading it. It was like all the wrong notes. My brain kept telling me I was playing the wrong thing. And I kept saying, like, no brain, we're fine. I finally had to stop looking at the music and play Amazing Grace by memory. Anyway, this is a real digression. I just think about keys a lot in dance music, and the kind of feelings they evoke, and especially on the fiddle the number of open strings that you have.

**Mary Lea**

That’s right. That affects the resonance; that definitely affects the resonance of the instrument. And that’s one of the things that I like about playing English country dance music. You’re playing in, like, G minor and C minor and E♭: all these different keys. It’s more challenging and gives you a different sound on the instrument. And, of course, I play viola too. It allows me to drop over [to the C string]. Some of those keys are better [on the viola] ….I love playing C minor on the viola, of course, the bottom note is a C, and it’s just really rich.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's no reason we can't play in those keys in contra dance. There's no rule against it.

**Mary Lea**

No, but since I taught fiddle for so long, I know that it's a challenge for people to, if they're an adult, to get their hands around the half steps, like playing an E♭. You're just doing a really scrunchy first finger on the D string. It's just really hard, often, for people to hear the pitch right and be able to reproduce it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. There's a few New England tunes in flat keys, like those tunes in F for sure, a few tunes in B♭ and a couple in E♭. They don't go much past that.

**Mary Lea**

I think those are, like, Scottish in origin. I mean, the Scottish tradition definitely has more variety that way.

**Julie Vallimont**

I wonder if that's related.

**Mary Lea**

I think it's more classical. I mean, so much of the Scottish music is written down. And people even in Cape Breton... I remember visiting this guy who played at the square dances, that's where I first learned to play by ear, at a camp there, and Joe Kennedy, but you go to his house, and he'd just have stacks of music. Everybody read music, even there, and so Scott Skinner and all those players had lots of different keys that they played in, just as the dancing had that sort of balletic tradition too, the Highland dancing, which was very much born out of ballet. So it's just different.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you are putting medleys together as a contra fiddler, do you have thoughts about what keys go well together? What are your usual go-to...?

**Mary Lea**

Well, sometimes it could be rising up to an A tune... on the fiddle anyway, you know is a bright sound.... So that can often be a good ending tune. But also if the character is driving, the fact that it's in A might not matter at all, but I like changing mode. So if it's minor to major, or really having a strong change like that, so it could be an A tune to an A minor tune or vice-versa. I love doing sometimes quirky ones. I remember doing something in an English tradition actually, there's a tune called Jacob Hall's Jig that is written out, I think, in F minor. But it's actually usually played in E minor. And because of the instruments that we had, we had a couple of saxophones and it was at the end of the weekend, and all six of us were playing together. We started off in F minor and then dropped to E minor and had all of the horns just kind of go play out on that note. It kind of hit you right in the solar plexus, or something.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, dropping down that half step.

**Mary Lea**

That kind of thing can be very effective, depending on what your instrumentation is or what the pianist can do to bring out these changes with drones and things like that, or whatever they do. I usually don't stay in the same key going across a medley. Do you?

**Julie Vallimont**

Not usually but again, I was like, well, is that because that's just what everyone around me did?

**Mary Lea**

I think it's because it's noticeable, and if you're dancing it has to sort of hit you on the head.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like, kind of after a while, what's the point of changing tunes? Dudley Laufman would say, well, if a tune is not worth playing 20 times, why is it worth playing at all? So if you are going to change tunes, it should be noticeable, or else what's the point? I do sometimes like playing two similar tunes next to each other in the same key for a subtle change but that's more like a variety thing, or an experiment thing.

**Mary Lea**

Might be doing a groovy set.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, the time I will put two tunes in the same key next to each other is if I'm changing time signatures, like a jig to a reel in the same key signature is really nice, or a half time style tune to a reel is really nice... same key. Don't change too many things. I've worked with some fiddlers who are very dogmatic about key changes, they're like, you can't go from D to B-flat. And I'm kind of like, why not?

**Mary Lea**

I'm the same way with you. A lot of it depends on knowing the players. When you're just getting together with people you don't know, you might make assumptions about how they're going to play. But actually, if you know your player well... I mean Kate is always going to figure out a way to make an interesting transition. I think that's just built into her DNA at this point and can do it sometimes with not much time to spare. That's like shouting out, Key of F!!

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, and then all of a sudden, you have four beats to figure out chordally how to get from one place to an entirely different place. I do love that challenge.

**Mary Lea**

Yeah, well, good. That's what makes it makes it fun and spontaneous then.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's why I like doing weird keys next to each other. But of course, it has to sound good.

**Mary Lea**

Some you say, that didn't work right there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Often it depends on what the last note of the tune is and the first note of the next tune and the phrasing of the two tunes and how well they run together. I feel like sometimes that's even more important than what keys they're in. I can massage many things harmonically. But if the tune itself... if they don't fit well together, I can't fix that.

**Mary Lea**

Well, that's up to the melody players, either to change the ending in some way to make it fit to the next one. I know I have to think about it. I try to make that adjustment in my head or before I start because I can see that some things are not going to work.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like an exit strategy for how to get out of that tune into the next one?

**Mary Lea**

Or maybe these two really aren't good together for just that reason.

**Julie Vallimont**

So when you're teaching contra fiddlers, what is the kind of things that you teach them? What are the most important fiddling basics?

**Mary Lea**

Well, when I did those workshops, I actually made tapes, back in the day, there were tapes, of some of my... just browsing through all this contra dance material. I had all these different recordings, and finding good transitions, finding interesting medleys, looking at endings and beginnings, looking at timbre changes, and maybe jig to reel, that kind of change, what would work. So I had examples of those, and that would be something I'd send out ahead of time, with maybe a series of questions, and just things to listen for. And that would be to bring a little bit more of an analytical idea... approach to things. When the dancers... it was really interesting, when they were at Pinewoods, they would often just sit up on the stage and listen to the musicians.

Part of it was the musical side of it, part of it was the interpersonal side, which is always a big one. I've worked with people in groups, and having them really try to be clear and respectful of people's strengths and weaknesses. So you could have one person, this person could maybe solo, but that person would not be comfortable doing that. So don't put somebody in that position. Somebody is maybe more organized than the other, but does that person, just because they're a better organizer, should they be the leader? Do you want a leader, or do you not want a leader? How are you going to work and settle your differences in this, and how are you going to vouch for yourself? If you're a shy person, it's like really, this is gonna leave me out because I can't do this. There's a lot of interpersonal stuff, and then also communication when you're playing. So how are you indicating it's your turn to take a lead or who's doing that or how are you deciding that? You're not going to always plan that out ahead of time, you have to come up with certain body cues and ways of talking but not talking, nonverbal communication. So stuff like that, that I would work with.

**Julie Vallimont**

I've learned a lot of that kind of communication by screwing it up. I feel like a lot of bands have this kind of story where I'm on the other side of the stage from the fiddler as a piano player, and the fiddler can't really talk while they play so they can only get a few words out. The notorious example is where you say, "don't go any faster" and all you hear is "faster." So we made a few rules, that first of all, you only speak, at least for my bands, only speak in the positive. Say what you want to happen, not what is happening, and use as few words as possible. And then there are words that rhyme with other words, which is really problematic. So funny.

**Mary Lea**

Then there's the nonverbal things where you kind of lift your head, sort of nod at somebody, is that saying, you take it, or I'm going to take it. So what do you mean by that and how do you indicate that?

**Julie Vallimont**

Finally, I was like, well I'll jerk my head backwards if it means I'm gonna take it, and I'll point my head at you if it means you're gonna take it, or some people can take a finger and point at people or themselves depending on what instrument you play. So funny. And then some people yell chord symbols, some people yell letters, some people yell numbers. Some people do the thing where you lean to one side for the four chord and lean to the other side for the five chord and a one chord is straight up and down.

**Mary Lea**

And then of course, there's the changing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like when you're gonna change tunes. How do you do that usually?

**Mary Lea**

Yeah, that can be change, just like, trying to trying to pass it along.

**Julie Vallimont**

Whatever it is, it has to be definitive. Because there's nothing worse than that feeling of panic when you're like, are we switching? I don't know, are we? Or we've all had moments where one person doesn't get the memo and they don't switch, and then you're in two different keys at the same time. Those are like basic contra dance band skills.

**Mary Lea**

That's right, it's true, and it takes a while to kind of get comfortable with that. And also to be assertive, you can't be timid about it. If you're slightly timid, you're not sure what that person wants to do. It's okay to be assertive but then sometimes it can be too much...oh well...

**Julie Vallimont**

Well we all do our best. I think you have an ear for these kinds of subtle band dynamics. When I was a new English player and I was playing with you a few times at the Wednesday Boston dance, I was terrified, to be honest. You were so nice, and there was no reason I should be terrified, except that being a new English player can be terrifying.

**Mary Lea**

I completely get that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like, you're at a thing that everyone else knows it, except you, where the dancers know the tune, the caller knows the tune.

**Mary Lea**

I mean, how would you know?

**Julie Vallimont**

There's only one way to learn. You noticed these very subtle things about my playing and then afterwards you just said them to me in the most helpful, supportive way. Like, did you know that when you play in 3/4, you're cutting off the end of the third beat just a little bit? And I said, huh, thank you I didn't know I was doing that. And I went home and I practiced with a metronome and I realized that when I was nervous, I actually went back to old recordings of myself playing and listened back to them to see if I can hear what you were talking about, and I realized it was when I was nervous or excited that I was doing that.

**Mary Lea**

That's not atypical, other people do that, too.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think it's a very common thing, in reels or jigs or whatever, to cut off the end of either your measures of the end of a B part or the A part because you're kind of speeding up. So then that sent me on this really fun journey of learning how to rhythmically anchor myself.

**Mary Lea**

Wow, and as the rhythm player, what could be more important?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, exactly. It's kind of my job, right?

**Mary Lea**

That's your job and I mean, that's such a great, great thing to actually spend time with.

**Julie Vallimont**

So I spent time with a metronome and played with the metronome until it felt effortless to play with the metronome. It's like that joke, oh, this metronome is always dragging or whatever, but you play with it until you just kind of exist with that, which actually prepared me really well for doing later studio recording where you do have to be able to play effortlessly with a click track, often, if you're recording. Then there was this thing Susie Petrov taught me where instead of tapping one foot, she taps alternating feet and so she taps left, right, left, right.

**Mary Lea**

Like marching, your marching band.

**Julie Vallimont**

That one thing really grounded my playing.

**Mary Lea**

Well, it probably also balances you, too, because you're working both sides of your body. That's a great thing to do.

**Julie Vallimont**

So if I'm playing a waltz and I'm doing this, left, right, tapping, it's like a hemiola. It crosses the bar line in chunks of three. And so you really can't rush across the measure. It makes it a lot harder to do that.

**Mary Lea**

Interesting. Good for you, what a great discovery.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thanks for that observation, because it sent me down this whole road of... doing anything like contra music, or picking something to get good at. It's fun. It's as much about the process as the result. Because along the way, in order to get better, you have to figure out what these things are and learn new things. And then all of a sudden, you end up on this other adventure. So thanks for that. I know you've been a mentor to many people.

**Mary Lea**

I really love the interpersonal side of it. It mean it's extremely important, there's no way of getting around it. That probably is why the four of us could stay together for so long. We're so different, the four of us in [Bare Necessities](https://barenecessities.bandcamp.com/). We're also not fighting over repertoire, which is one thing that drives people apart often. I think we're able to process too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Learn what each other's tendencies are and learn how to work on that together as a band to support each other.

**Julie Vallimont**

It has been so wonderful to talk with you about all these things today. Thank you so much for your experience and your perspective.

**Mary Lea**

Thanks, Julie. It's fun to go back on this and I just appreciate so much that you're doing this for the greater good. And also, just, drawing in people from along this history of playing, I started in 1976 and here it is 2020. it's a long time. It's amazing.

**Julie Vallimont**

And it'll go on for many, many more years.

**Mary Lea**

It's been a great ride and so many wonderful people along the way. I mean, amazing people and amazing musicians.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's why I keep coming back, ultimately it's the people, the friendships and the connections. You said it better than I did. It's wonderful. Well, thank you so much.

**Mary Lea**

Take care. Thanks.

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