Contra Pulse Episode 22 – Nils Fredland

**Julie Vallimont**

Nils Fredland has been calling dances with admirable skill and infectious energy since 2000. Respected for his expertise as a teacher and caller, sensitive leadership, and generosity, Nils has been one of the busiest and most sought-after callers in the business. He draws on a large and varied repertoire of dances, presenting material from centuries-old "chestnuts" to cutting-edge contemporary choreography.

Nils is also known for breathing new life into traditional singing squares, and he has co-authored two books on the topic with master callers. Nils studied classical trombone at Indiana University, and has played his horn in ensembles ranging from symphony orchestras to ska bands. In his contra band Elixir, Nils brings together his myriad talents as caller and trombonist.

Nils has worked for the Country Dance and Song Society as a project manager, an editor, a program director (currently for Family Week at Ogontz), and an education specialist; has been a Waldorf music teacher; and enjoys his current position as artistic director of a community arts organization in the Upper Valley of New Hampshire and Vermont called Revels North.

During our interview, we talked about Nils’ background in classical trombone, is ventures into a cappella and ska, and how he ended up as a caller and Contra musician. Nils share some stories from his many hours on the stage, and we spend a lovely time reminiscing about legendary caller Ralph Sweet. And he talks about working with musicians as a caller, and his favorite features of country dance music.

We recorded this conversation late at night, after Nils had already done an online Revels event, so it was after midnight when we ended. We were getting a little tired, but I think it also made it easier to speak openly about things and I found Nils’ thoughts very moving. Hope you enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hello, Nils Fredland, welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Nils Fredland**

Thank you, Julie. I'm really happy to be here.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm so glad to see you. It's been a while. We used to see each other just at things, you know, when you're just out in the world. And you see each other at things, dance weekends and such. The last time might have been not so much these days, no, maybe when we were in Colorado together at Rocky Mountain Rendezvous Dance Weekend. Was that the last time I saw you?

**Nils Fredland**

I think probably that was, what, back in September, or something like that. I think that's right.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. September 2019. The Before Times.

**Nils Fredland**

It is remarkable where we are right now. But it's nice to see your smiling face.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's nice to see you. There's so many things we could talk about. I mean, selfishly, I just want to ask you, like, what you've been up to, but we'll get to that via contra dancing. But what I would love to do is just, I would love to have you share a little bit of your story of how you got started playing for contra dances and how you ended up calling. Maybe those paths are related, and maybe they're not. So I'd be curious to hear about all that.

**Nils Fredland**

Well, it'd be fun to kind of walk down this memory lane, and I probably will get some of these details wrong, because it's a while ago now. I'll pull in all of the elements and perhaps others that are listening can reach out and correct me on the order.

**Nils Fredland**

I'm sure that they will. So let's see, I started contra dancing in, like, 1996? 1997? I went to my first contra dance. That was in Plainfield, Vermont as a culminating party of a recording project that was done by Village Harmony. I'm sure some of your listeners are familiar with Village Harmony, Larry Gordon, and that whole wonderful group of people. My very first contra dance was called by Fred Park and the band was [Popcorn Behavior](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9DWHCDXcmw) with probably a Stefan Amidon that was maybe nine years old.

**Julie Vallimont**

They will.

**Nils Fredland**

Wow! I'm so jealous.

**Nils Fredland**

Stefan and Sam and Thomas, right? Thomas Bartlett, the piano player.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thomas Bartlett and Keith Murphy.

**Nils Fredland**

I don't think Keith was playing on that night. I think it was just the three boys, but that evening really made an impression both with respect to the calling, I was completely captivated by Fred. I remember watching him and being sort of overwhelmed and very confused about what direction my body was supposed to go in. But also feeling just so well taken care of and kind of excited by the whole experience, and a lot of that was just coming, because Fred was so joyful about what he was doing, you know. And then the music kind of moved me along. So that was a pretty auspicious beginning to life in contra dancing. And so gosh, fast forward to a Northern Harmony tour that I was on maybe in the late 90s, early 2000s. Seth Houston happened to be on this particular tour, as did Anna Patton and a number of other people that were already involved in the contra dance world. And Seth had this idea that he wanted to create a contra dance band out of members of this particular iteration of Northern Harmony. And so we did, and he knew that I was a trombone player and encouraged me to pick up the horn and play. That band was called Jonah and the Whales, we probably had, I don't know, maybe three gigs. I don't know how many times we played as a as a contra dance band over the course of that tour. But we had a good time. Anna and Seth and I, Naomi Morse. Oh, gosh, Emily Miller also played fiddle. My friend Haley Anderson played bari sax, it was a pretty intense band. So that was a good introduction to play music for contra dances.

Seth, as I think you probably know, Julie, is a very playful musician. But he's also really, really heady about stuff. And so he created all of these arrangements, which was like a dream for me, because I didn't come from a background of being comfortable making stuff up at all. So having someone actually set notes in front of me, there was definitely a level of comfort there that I wouldn't have had if the approach had been, you're a trombone player, and it would be great just for you to come and like play some stuff. I would have been a little bit lost, especially then. Having Seth there having a vision and shepherding it along by saying, I think the trombone would sound great doing this, gave me a lot of kind of safety. And it also gave me a lot of ideas that have evolved as the direction that I've taken playing trombone for contra dances over the course of the last, I don't know, 25 years. So it really started there.

At some point, on that tour, I had a little bit of experience calling a couple of open mics in Bloomington, Indiana, which is where I actually went to some of my earliest regular contra dances in the 90s, so I knew the mechanics of calling, but I hadn't really had much of an opportunity to kind of do it on a regular basis. And on this tour, we worked with a couple of different callers, we actually rolled through a town in Iowa, I think it was Iowa, and Will Mentor, who I didn't have any relationship with at the time, I don't even think we talked or met that night. I remember seeing him call, he called with Jonah and the Whales, which was really a fun thing. Everything swirled together and came full circle in a lot of ways. In any case, there were opportunities on that tour where we had the inclination to dance but there was no caller, and so I sort of stepped forward and tried to use the limited skills that I had as a caller at that point to cobble together these dance experiences. I remember once with no sound system, in a giant echoey gymnasium in Germany, trying to climb up this climbing wall and yell so that people could hear me. Most of them didn't really understand what I was saying. But it was a party, you know, that's an early calling memory that was quite formative, like, all right, I'm just gonna embrace the situation that's in front of me and here we go! Let's see what happens. I think that, as well as some other dance calling experiences that happened during that tour, planted the seed in Anna's mind that eventually grew into what became Elixir, which is really what has evolved as my main relationship to making music in the contra dance context.

There's one significant experience that happened prior to falling in step with Elixir and that was going on a big cross-country tour. At this point I had started a career, I remember going to my dad, my economics professor father and saying, Dad, I'm going to be contra dance caller. God love him, he was willing to go along with that idea. I went on a big cross-country tour shortly after that with good friends of mine from Asheville, North Carolina, Pearl Mueller, Willie Repoley and Chris Holleman in [a band called Mock Turtle Soup](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ded8H5cDMQ). I did all of the calling and a little bit of trombone playing. So that was another experience that evolved from the experience with Jonah and the Whales and sort of was a bridge to moving in the direction of what became [Elixir](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4czDm3Jr4xk), when I found myself back in New England. So that's kind of the short version, I can go longer. I'm sure there are other details that I can dig into, but ask me questions.

**Julie Vallimont**

We can circle back to all these things. This does not have to be a linear interview. So you were a classical trombone player in college, that's what you studied in college. What was it like making the shift from classical trombone to probably not playing by ear much at that point, to learning to play by ear, or maybe you never learned to play by ear, maybe it wasn't relevant for Elixir. What would you say about those things?

**Nils Fredland**

I was definitely most comfortable with a piece of music in front of me, and to an extent that is still true. I did happen to be at Indiana University at a time when there were a lot of really amazing trombone players, mostly in the classical realm. There were these two really terrific, big bands and so I had the opportunity to play under, I think I played lead in a big band that was led by an amazing trumpet player and director named Dominic Spera. And even though I didn't solo in that band, that actually put me around people that could make stuff up. I think at the time, I was very intimidated. I felt like I was a total fish out of water, like a complete fraud in that context. But I think about that experience more frequently now. It's surprising to me, how readily I can kind of draw up those experiences and realize that that was some of the foundation of oh, yeah, it is possible to actually play something interesting without reading the notes off the page. I think falling into this world where, there are other trombone players that play contra dance music, but there are very few of us. I think, for me, personally, there wasn't any one really for me to compare myself to and feel both inspired and also, perhaps, I don't know, I used the word intimidated before and I think that would apply here. I think, especially early on, I was trying to kind of get my get my footing. I think, because there was no basis for comparison, I just was like, what's gonna work? What's gonna work for me? Like, if I don't have something to play, what do I do? That started with a lot of long tones. I understood enough about chord progressions that I could kind of pick out the roots of most chords and play them. When I played them, long and low, people seem to like it, and so I started there, and then that moved into maybe some basslines, and then I also have some comfort and strength playing in the upper register.

And so you know, exploring those two kinds of extreme ranges and not doing a lot of melodic stuff, but enough that complimented what else was going on musically really opened up into this realm of being comfortable playing by ear and responding to what the musicians around me are doing. A lot of times when I bring the trombone out, I think especially early on, when dancers didn't have a sort of relationship or understanding of my approach, the response would be, "oh, God, a trumpet, that's gonna, like, overwhelm everything" and sound people, I love the sound people that I've worked with. But sound people often would say, "you don't need a microphone on that thing, it's just gonna be loud." And I'm like, "no, it's not loud, it's not just loud." There's a lot that the trombone can do that's not just loud. So there's been this journey of also understanding what the full range of the trombone is in terms of dynamics and how that complements the needs of the moment from a musical standpoint. I don't profess to be a great trombone player, but I think I do understand contra dance music enough to know how the horn fits well, according to my own abilities. So I've really played within that. I haven't tried to be anybody other than myself as a trombone player, which is kind of a nice situation to find oneself in, and I think contra dance music is a kind of perfect environment for that.

**Julie Vallimont**

We're all best when we are ourselves, for sure. You also have some ska background as well, yes?

**Nils Fredland**

I did. My first job out of college, was, I was a classical trombone major at Indiana University and it became pretty clear towards the end of my time at IU that what I imagined myself doing when I was in the eighth grade, and setting myself on this path of becoming a symphony trombone player was probably not gonna happen for a lot of reasons. There were a lot of incredibly talented players in the class that I graduated with, some of whom play in the Boston Symphony now and who made finals in New York and all of the big orchestras, I was looking at these guys and saying, first of all, I don't play quite at that same level. I also don't have the drive that would really be required to pursue that dream. There was a little bit of a kind of mourning of that identity. I really thought that that's the direction that I was gonna go in, and it didn't manifest. I completely lost track of your question, isn't that funny? You asked me about ska, right? So Bloomington, Indiana was a great live original music scene. There's a great club scene, a whole bunch of different kinds of music. I sang in this fascinating, fun, [acapella band called Monkey Puzzle](https://open.spotify.com/artist/55GbnzdgtKCCtmPcMqLI4b?si=IX13Da-_Tn2ZVXQoNKyf8A), which was a really eye-opening, not trombone-related, but completely changed my perspective as a musician, introduced me to groups like Sly and the Family Stone and Grand Funk Railroad and the Talking Heads. I grew up listening to the Beatles and Gilbert and Sullivan records, that was my musical upbringing. I listened to the Mozart horn concertos. This great recording by this kind of wild child French horn player named Dennis Brain, some of your listeners probably know Dennis Brain.

These are my early memories, and so Monkey Puzzle opened my eyes to all of this music that I just was completely unfamiliar with. I started going to hear some local bands including this ska band that was very popular at the time in the '90s called Johnny Socko in Bloomington. Johnny Socko was based in Bloomington but toured all over the place. When I graduated from college, I was a little rootless. I didn't know what I was going to do. I was working at Ben and Jerry's and staying in my college town and still playing a lot of music and singing with Monkey Puzzle, but not with a lot of direction. Some would question the direction that my next choices took me. The trombone player in Johnny Socko was a guy that I knew was leaving the band. I knew some of the guys in the band sort of peripherally, I was a fan. I used to go to their shows all the time and it just sort of happened that I fell into this role. [I played in that band for a year](ohttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UykyfIiqlQ0), we played 250 shows in a year and traveled across the country coast to coast. The horn arrangements were done by a fantastic saxophone player named Josh Silbert who came from a jazz background, he'd studied it at IU. The trumpet player was named Demian Hostetter, also played at IU in the jazz program. I was sort of merged with these two guys that did have a lot of the skills that I didn't currently possess, and while there was a lot about that year that was not especially healthy for me, and I don't need to go into those details, but one of the things that it really did teach me was how to perform, because it was a grind, night after night. I remember, we traveled across the country in this 16-passenger van.

I joined the band in January of '97, I think, and I remember getting in the van at the beginning of March and not getting out of the van until the end of April, we had three days off during that whole stretch, and otherwise it was just new town, new club, new town, new club, new town, new club, playing the same setlist but for a completely different crowd. That was something that I'd never experienced before. So the opportunity to like, be on repeat like that, and making it feel fresh and fun and trying to embrace the opportunity to play as well as I could and also be a little bit looser than I had kind of grown accustomed to in my very classical training. I'm glad you brought that up. I haven't thought about that whole experience and those guys in a really long time.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's funny that some of the skills we have in our other lives as musicians, we can take to contra dance musicianship and they transfer well in this funny way, like for you, getting this experience just performing and kind of just cranking it out every night. Contra dance musicianship, if you're doing it full time, often involves a lot of travel and getting used to that world and then also just the way you internalize horn lines. A lot of that would lead to the future sound of Elixir. You and Jesse Hazzard-Watkins [now Readlynn] both have classical music background, and so you have that certain kind of tone. So it's not like, big band horn lines, it's something else right? They're infused with Anna's sensibilities, and she thinks about music in a jazz perspective. You take the three of you and your various sensibilities and you get the sound of Elixir. Plus Owen Morrison, the rhythm machine, and Ethan just carrying the fiddle tune. Ethan's the one who's kind of holding it down, in a way, while you guys do all these amazing things.

**Nils Fredland**

It's really fun. We just had this opportunity to play a Zoom concert with Elixir for some of the folks on the West coast primarily, it was a replacement for what would have been a dance weekend in Monterey [California]. It happens to coincide with the band's 14th anniversary, I think, we've been around for a while. We had this walk down memory lane and Ethan put together a slideshow of some of the early pictures of us, which was a really fun thing to see. We didn't actually see it until he unveiled it during the Zoom. So we had this little break to reflect on where we've been as a band and how things have evolved, and I really love the opportunity to collaborate musically with people that I also enjoy personally. That's a big part of why playing music in the contra dance context has been really satisfying. Because I really just like everybody that I play with, and that is especially true for my bandmates in Elixir. It was great to have that opportunity to take that walk down memory lane and realize how much we've grown together as a band musically and how that has actually been informed in so many ways by how we've grown together personally. We've been through a lot on the road and you know, they're family, they really are. That's such a lovely experience to have. There are things that I will do as a musician with Elixir and ways that I'll talk and bear out whatever struggles I'm having musically with them that I would not be able to do with any other group just because of sort of who we have become in each other's lives. I really am sorry, I'm kind of waxing, I don't know what the right word is...nostalgic, and I think not having the opportunity to be around people so much in the last nine months, I feel like when I have the opportunity to talk about people I care about, all I want to say is I love everybody!

**Julie Vallimont**

I think that feeling is what many of us feel when we're new to contra dancing. I had a friend, several people will know who this is, but he just discovered contra dancing, actually, this could be anybody's story, that's the thing. He discovered contra dancing, and then just fell in love with it, became obsessed and started going to every weekend he could and the first year it was like him falling in love with this and all the people. Then after a while you still love it, but you kind of get used to how great it is. Sometimes we even take it for granted, so it is a chance to step back and have all these fond memories, it is a nice thing. I think that's one of the things that draws contra musicians to it, it's not a performance, that's not the point. It's something else. It's like an interaction with people that is hopefully meaningful, or if not, fun. Hopefully it's one or two of those things, ideally, both. There are other musicians who have come to this from other kinds of music, where they played in rock bands, and were tired of the club scene and showing up and no one knowing who they were, and it not always being a healthy environment. I was intrigued into doing techno contra because other people were doing techno contra, I thought well, I could do it live, and I liked electronic music but was not into the rave scene at all. All these things, and so it's an interesting home for people.

**Nils Fredland**

You mentioned techno contra and that is something that as I've evolved in my role as a caller and also as a musician, there's definitely a period, and it wasn't really that long ago, where I was sort of skeptical of, I don't know, techno contra or new stuff, for whatever reason. I mean I say this, I feel like such a, I don't know, hypocrite or something. Because I'm bringing this instrument that is highly untraditional into this world. So for me to turn my nose up at techno contra seems really funny. I don't feel that way now. There's this sense of... I think early on I felt like I knew what I liked and I knew I wanted things to be the way that I liked them to be. I had a vision and now what excites me most about this world is seeing bands that are doing stuff that I haven't encountered before. Actually getting up on stage and calling a techno contra, I remember, in Boston, with you and Noah [VanNorstrand], for the first time, kind of getting it. It was one of the [Spark in the Dark](https://www.bidadance.org/) series. I remember I was there, and I was like, oh, this is why people are really excited about this. Like, I get it now. I wasn't super grumpy about it or anything before that, but there's something about that night that I can go back to... stand on that stage. I can feel what it was like, listening to Noah sing the PJ song for the first time. It's like, this is really weird and it's so great, you know? Isn't it amazing that contra dancing and contra dance music can be all of these things, like this super traditional old time dance that is just rockin', and it's so fun to call squares to, to whatever it is that Elixir does to [what you and Noah do](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cy1S8JgFZbU) [when you're playing for a techno contra dance](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0anERsdyqI&t=16s) to what [DJ Improper was doing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jeTCvnoMC0). I enjoyed being onstage with a single DJ too, like it was wild, like all of this stuff.

**Julie Vallimont**

If contra dance music could be all these different things, what is the heart of what makes good contra dance music to you, in that case? I'm just skipping, right? Usually I save these questions for the end, but I'm just skipping right to the money question.

**Nils Fredland**

Yeah, gosh, what makes it good? Rhythm, I mean, really, I think if a band is really churning out great rhythm, then it's easy to layer on top of that. If that piece is absent, then there can be exciting elements that happen, but for the most part it falls a little flat for me. So, I think, like, the most essential thing, what makes really, really great dance music is just a solid rhythmic motor. That can come... like, I mean, you mentioned Owen Morrison earlier and called him the rhythm machine, or something like that. To have that model and be able as an instrumentalist that is not typically thought of as a rhythm instrument, like the trombone can complement that rhythmic drive. But everything rhythmically that I do with my instrument is informed by what I hear and feel coming from Owen, so the whole band really sits on his shoulders and goes from there. And the fact that a brilliant musician like Anna Patton can do as many things as she does in the context of an Elixir set during a contra dance, she's amazing on her own, but she's even better when she's got somebody like Owen to play over.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely, that foundation frees you up to do so many things.

**Nils Fredland**

I feel that too, when I'm calling a square dance with an old time band, the whole drive of that music, it just gets me going. I can feel it when my calls fall into this rhythmic pattern, I know that that's because what's coming from the band is inspiring that in me naturally, it's not anything that I'm really trying to do. I'm listening to that. A lot of what comes out of my mouth is not really scripted and is totally informed by how much drive there is in what's happening rhythmically from the band. I really think the special sauce of any great contra dance music has got to be the rhythmic foundation.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love those moments watching you call squares where you're just in the moment like that, on fire. It's like the same feeling of watching someone take a really inspired guitar solo or something, when you're doing patter, or I don't have the right square dance terminology, hash calling, you're making up stuff, dancers are doing it, whatever you call that. I love the chances I've had to be on stage [with you], and I can just tell that you're in the zone. It's so cool to watch. Because you're improvising with the dancers the way that you would improvise with music and that's really cool.

**Nils Fredland**

I think that's part of why square dance calling has become a favorite and in particular, I love calling singing squares. I know you really wanted to talk a little bit about the singing squares, and I'm happy to do that. That was like my gateway into square dance calling in the same way that the music that Seth Houston put in front of me before I had played for any contra dances on trombone was like my gateway to playing trombone a lot more in the contra dance world. My gateway to square dance calling was oh, singing squares. Like, if I just sing this song, they're gonna do a dance. That's cool. So I can do that. I don't have to make anything up at all, the whole prospect of what's known as patter calling, like the hash calling, making things up, creating patterns based on what you see the dancers doing on the floor. This kind of back and forth, like... it looks to me like they're a little tired right now, I'm going to throw in a circle to the left something that everybody can do, kind of recenter, get back on track, and then we'll get crazy again. I never would have been able to embrace that kind of calling without first encountering something that had some kind of clear boundaries around it, right? Patter square dance calling is like a wild party. You know? It's like, as a caller, you're just like, well, I don't know what's going on, here we go! That's sort of the way I feel about it. You can always come back to the somewhat more scripted singing squares and New England squares that are prompted a bit more like a contra dance. Those can be a party too, don't get me wrong, I love it all. A big old southern square dance party is like nothing else. So good.

**Julie Vallimont**

While we're diversioning, there is [your legendary stage diving incident](https://youtu.be/Ss5fAYJZrgE?list=RDSs5fAYJZrgE&t=561).

**Nils Fredland**

Oh good lord.

**Julie Vallimont**

You've had some good moments on stage. I remember you saying there was a square dance down at Glen Echo [Maryland], that you were calling where it was full, it was packed.

**Nils Fredland**

[Recalling a different story.] There was no stage, this is the [DC Square Dance Collective](https://dcsquaredance.org/).

**Julie Vallimont**

Okay, not Glen Echo.

**Nils Fredland**

Yeah, not Glen Echo. This was in another part of the city at this church, this giant, I think, Episcopal cathedral, maybe in northwest, I'm not sure which part of the city [It's Saint Stephens Church in Mount Pleasant/Columbia Heights] but the Horseflies were playing and I was not really familiar with the Horseflies at that point. I had had a number of people say, "Do you know the band that you're calling with?" I sort of said, "A little bit, but not so much." This happened to be, I think, an anniversary dance for the Square Dance Collective, maybe it was their first anniversary or something, it was a significant thing, so they were expecting a big crowd. The big crowd was made even bigger by fans of the band coming out, and my God, [there was no stage](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zblWOox6nk), the band was so loud, it was an enormous concrete box. There was so much that was overwhelming about it. And talk about rhythm, I mean, that band is all rhythm, like hits you in the solar plexus and just drags you along. I felt like I was on another planet. [There were probably 400 people in that church dancing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8_-gw7Ld4I), and I could see the two squares that were right in front of me. And then it was just a mass of people beyond that. A lot of times when I'm calling a square, I'll be actually focused on a particular square, a set of squares that I can look at and respond to just to make sure that my calls are on track, that I'm not getting too far ahead of people. This night was completely miles away from that experience, it was just, all right, I'm gonna get on this train and ride it and hope that everyone that's here is being safe and having a good time. Because I don't have any idea. It was pretty fun. I saw a picture after that someone had taken, a balcony shot. You can see that I'm a tiny, tiny little postage stamp in the left hand corner of the frame and then it's just like, people. You can't even tell if they're dancing figures or squares or anything like that. It's just like, a whole sea of people. It was an amazing experience. I've never worked with the Horseflies since then, but that is one that was definitely a peak moment, for sure. Amazing.

**Julie Vallimont**

We could talk more about this later in the interview but it's just a side note. I just recently interviewed Tony Parkes. We were talking about squares and how they've changed in popularity over the years and how it used to be everywhere. They've waned in popularity, but yet they're back in a way, you know? What was the demographic of the people at this event that you were calling at?

**Nils Fredland**

It was all over the map, and I would say that it was mostly, if there was one age group that was most well represented, it was probably 25–35, I would say. I've seen elements of that in other places that I've called, but that was really, to have that be the defining demographic, that was unique to the DC scene for me. I think the DC group is still dancing, or was before we entered into this period of no dancing [Nils is correct.]. I'd be curious to revisit that group and see how things have settled, because I think at the time, there was still this massive movement and enthusiasm for traditional square dancing, that I'm sure still exists, but I think it exists differently now. There was this fire around it. A bunch of dance groups popped up in various places across the country and now it's settled into being a thing that people do, right? It's not, perhaps, the cool thing that you have to try now. But this is a thing that's part of people's lives. I think that's the difference, is that it's become part of the fabric of the way people in certain parts of the country socialize. There are certain areas where it's always been that, like it never died out. But then there are lots of places where square dancing hit a peak and then basically disappeared. Now it's kind of hit another peak, and it's settling and it doesn't feel like it's disappearing in the same way. So much of that has to do with people like Tony doing what they do, you know... and Bob Dalsemer, Bill Litchman. I know that I'm forgetting people, David Millstone, Will Mentor, my favorite square dance callers, Beth Molaro. People all over the place, T-Claw... It's great to see people carrying that torch in a way, but also not having to prove that it's a good thing. Nobody has to prove that square dancing is a good thing, square dancing is just a good thing. It never hasn't been a good thing. It's great that the world is recognizing the world, I say, the world, the world!

**Nils Fredland**

We're mainstream, baby!

**Nils Fredland**

It's great that some of the people that maybe were square skeptical before have realized that it's all dancing, and it's all awesome.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember with you and with Will [Mentor], during our techno contras, doing a few techno squares just to see what would happen. I felt like we were literally making it up. I was like, "What do you want?" You're like, "Whatever." I'm like, "Does it need to be phrased?" You're like, "Nope." Okay, we're just gonna do something.

**Nils Fredland**

That's exactly right. When Will and I talk about square dancing, I think that's at the heart of every conversation I've ever had with him about square dancing, we're just gonna kind of do something. Like, we're gonna see what happens. It's well within the tradition, as far as I'm concerned, you know? Square dancing is great. Sorry, I'm just gonna sit with that for a moment and enjoy the fact that there was a period of time not too long ago when I used to get to call squares all the time. And it will come again.

**Julie Vallimont**

Can we talk about singing squares a little bit?

**Nils Fredland**

Hell yeah, we could talk about singing squares. I hope you don't have to edit that out. Because that is, in fact, the way that I feel about singing squares. Do you have a specific question, or you want me just to tell you about how I encountered them and why I felt compelled to explore them more?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, those things.

**Nils Fredland**

I was living in the Philadelphia area when I first was given a recording that was made, that eventually became [the Ralph Sweet's All Stars recording](https://cdss.force.com/commons/s/product/shindig-in-the-barn-singing-squares/01t1M00000LvEeEQAV) but this was a pre-release copy that a friend of mine, a caller friend of mine had. She gave this to me and I listened to it and heard "[The Auctioneer"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5VqFcZ4_Kc) and I thought, what in the world is this, and I want to do it. I was traveling a lot to call at the time, this was sometime in the mid- to late 2000s, I think and I was driving all over the place and I just put that CD in my car on repeat. I called along with it, and that's the way I learned. That's the way I learned my first singing square. My first singing square was "The Auctioneer." That's how I learned it. I just listened to [Ralph call](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBCElrznG9M) over and over and over and over and over again, and I would listen to a section and then I would play it again. I would sing along and then I would listen to it again and then I would sing along. Go to the beginning, learn all that patter. That's the way that I learned, before I had the opportunity to call with any dancers. It was just like, calling along with Ralph in my car. "The Auctioneer" was the first one I learned, I learned "Louisiana Swing" shortly after that, and then a couple of the other ones from that record. I remember the first time I called "The Auctioneer." I don't remember where it was. Great story, I don't even remember who the musicians were, I remember there were two of them. I remember saying, "I have this thing that I'd like to do but I don't have any music for it and I don't really know how to tell you what to do. Are you willing?" and they were like, "well, it'll probably be messy but sure, I guess so." I think it was a mess, but it was enough fun that I felt compelled to do it again. So you know, gradually coming across musicians that either played for Ralph or knew something about singing squares and could teach me from the musician's side what they needed from me as a caller. There was a real process of learning by doing. I showed up in Greenfield [Massachusetts] to call a dance, and Ralph was there, and I remember being like, I had been listening to this man in my car for, I don't know, a year. And then he was standing there in front of me and he was so enthusiastic in his very jolly Ralph way, and I don't remember if I called a singing square that night, I probably was terrified. I don't remember.

Anyway, meeting him then just inspired me to do more of that kind of thing. I think I asked him about singing squares during that conversation that I had with him at the [Guiding Star] Grange that night. Mostly what came across from him was just enthusiasm. I could tell, in the same way that I feel about calling, when I really get on a roll talking to somebody, you've given me an opportunity to think about how much I love it, you know? That's what this interview is doing for me. I felt the same kind of enthusiasm coming from Ralph, during this conversation. He had that laugh. That laugh, which I can't duplicate, if you've heard Ralph Sweet laugh then you know what I'm talking about. What really came across was just how much he loved it. He loved calling, he loved dancing. He loved singing squares, he loved the fact that people were interested in doing singing squares. And so I kept going, I kept calling singing squares, started to establish a little bit of a reputation around having that be a unique part of my repertoire.

**Nils Fredland**

All of these experiences and conversations that I had with people about singing squares, about the importance of kind of preserving the tradition and honoring Ralph, that was a big part of the conversations—people love Ralph. [That became a project that CDSS took on](https://cdss.force.com/commons/s/product/on-the-beat-with-ralph-sweet/01t1M00000LvEfIQAV). I was fortunate enough to be the point person between CDSS and Ralph. My whole journey with singing squares brought me into contact with Ralph, sent me off in this wonderful experience of being able to take this long standing tradition and make it my own, and then have the opportunity to work with the person that inspired me to go on the journey in the first place. I remember going and sitting down with Ralph... I have a long history of being hired for jobs that I'm actually not qualified to do. Including this job for CDSS, which was to be not only the point person for the project with Ralph, the book project with Ralph, but the editor. I'd had zero experience with editing books, no experience with book publication at all, but a lot of experience with dance calling, and a particular interest and experience with singing squares that I think, thanks to the faith that CDSS had in me, proved to be a real good relationship that I think, turned into a great resource. I felt like I had something to prove to the people that had given me the opportunity at CDSS to go and do this, I remember going to [Ralph's barn [the Powder Mill Barn]](https://www.facebook.com/Powder-Mill-Barn-120460758665582/?hc_ref=ARQ5PGExsutAV3EMsxbz6RsmD-tvOVcQDZ391xAWNIGrnRh0ZwRaI7umPMwhnF1pzGo&fref=nf&__xts__%5B0%5D=68.ARCu-R7u4J9v6kP08yIPV0arvgkliyDT3dA5vAwGS-Kw3oS4aaWccnzwgy07d8TIHD32_l0ljbCdxl-hoNYuXt_SPYVTfbipJ_rq0c9kwUfN96ryDYvjl4NCnAuHfSNxjTAOHaKOC6Q1vu56IMHN6iZDaAzQDzWdYJuc1vikl6UyNF9biuumER2tj5BfUcxZ7A_o6jL8kPhCMrWUl_YFzRHkxziGegv9aP5XjypdQV2JogRfgDshA7BuLygKYSOnkdy0lx_GfLq9sgaJRcybJuug7oPBmb2mao13GnsyB_SoZSo&__tn__=kC-R) in 2008, and I had a whole list of questions and we're gonna just get right into it and set all the all the guidelines and figure out how we're gonna approach this whole thing, and I was full. I knew what I was gonna say and what I was gonna do, and I walked in the barn and Ralph sat me down and said, "Let me tell you about this barn." He told me the whole history of the Powder Mill Barn and the powder mill industry in Enfield, Connecticut. I was probably there for, I don't know, six hours. We barely touched on square dancing, there was almost no conversation about square dancing at all, he just wanted to show me around.

I think, once I relaxed into the fact that we were engaged in developing a relationship that would then allow us to engage in this sort of complicated and messy work of unraveling all of these notes from his...he, at that point, he had been calling for over 60 years. He kept everything, like, so many notes, filing cabinets, full boxes and boxes of notes. We'd be exploring a particular dance and I would say, "show me your notes from this particular dance," and it would be, like, four binders full. "Oh, it's somewhere in here" and he'd be flipping through. There was a lot of time just talking and understanding... Sorry, I get a little sad thinking about it. I don't know if the book really tells the story of Ralph. I don't know if I can really do justice to telling the story of Ralph, there are people that know him a lot better than I do. There's so much more to him than the legacy that he left through his love for calling singing squares, right? I love the fact that I had the opportunity to actually engage with him in this mutual interest of ours. That was a really delightful thing. But way beyond that, for me, is just the chance to be around a human being that knew how to get excited about life. I felt that every time I was with him, and while singing squares was what brought me into contact with him in the first place, and I cannot call a singing square now without thinking about him, what I really feel like I got from that whole experience of working with him was a chance just to know how to be a good human. Because he was a really good human.

**Julie Vallimont**

He was.

**Nils Fredland**

You didn't ask me about any of this stuff, and I'm kind of walking down this memory lane, which is a real gift. I remember being with my boys, I have two boys and at the time, they were, I don't know how many years ago Ralph died, but this is a number of years ago now. [Ralph died in 2019.] I remember finding out, and I just remember being totally knocked off my feet. I hadn't really thought a lot about Ralph in a while, because the book was done. I would come across him at dances, and it was always really nice to see him. But then the news of the fact that he had died just knocked me flat. I realized more in that moment, how special he was to me.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember the first few times I went to the Greenfield dance afterwards and Ralph wasn't there, it just didn't feel... I was just always waiting for him to show up and give you a hug and say, hi. The first time I went to the Powder Mill Barn to play for his dance I was in total awe. [Ralph and his wife Carol Greenfield] were so welcoming, just so welcoming to us. I feel like there's something about these old halls that get infused with all the energy of all the dancing that happens there over so many years. It can't just be the beams and the wood floor, although that really helps. There's something else, there's this feeling when you go in a hall like this, you can just tell it has all this energy that it's absorbed over the years and created over the years, and I just felt that way walking into this building with all the pennants and kind of wishing that my life and his life have overlapped more.

**Nils Fredland**

I love the fact that Polly, his daughter, has kind of taken the barn and made it her own. She carries all those memories that we're talking about now of her dad, and no matter what happens in that barn now, there's no way that that spirit can't be felt. It's not being used for dancing so much now. But it's being used for other things, and the spirit of everything that's happened in that in that space, I think really does exist. I totally, totally agree. I feel that in a lot of dance halls, but that one in particular.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those are some good memories. I remember, I was a brand new contra musician and so I was learning how all this was working. I went out to just learn and Crowfoot was one of my favorite bands. They were doing a workshop at Ralph Page Dance [Legacy] Weekend, so I decided to go to Ralph Page, and you were calling there, and I think that was when you'd been calling for a while, but you were really coming into your own. You called this dance, it was for, like 12 people, it was a blender, a mixer? It was something, I'll edit this out if we don't remember what it was but it was a really cool experience. This might not go anywhere, if I can't remember what the dance was. You know what I'm talking about? Maybe 16 people?

**Nils Fredland**

Yeah, there's a 16-person dance called a double quadrille that came from a collection of dances by a New England caller named Rod Linnell. He wrote a number of these dances, the one that I think you're talking about is called [Rod's Quad #2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=alckn2sqC38). It's the only 16-person, the only kind of double square that I know. It was a nerve wracking experience to call it the first couple of times but once you do it... and that might have actually been one of the first times that I'd done it at Ralph Page. I do remember that experience.

**Julie Vallimont**

Actually, they keep careful notes, they keep like a list afterwards of what was called, and we can just look it up later.

**Nils Fredland**

I remember that weekend really well. I think that was a Ralph Sweet tribute... were they sort of honoring him over the course of that weekend?

**Nils Fredland**

There was a Ralph Page Dance Legacy Weekend event when Ralph and I actually got up on stage together and called "The Auctioneer," like in tandem. My wife was there that weekend, and I remember getting up, calling it with him standing side by side. We traded the patter back and forth off at the beginning and we traded figures, we were passing the microphone back and forth. We traded figures, and choruses. We finished the dance, I was riding high. We finished the dance and I walked off the stage. My wife was standing there and I just collapsed into a big puddle of tears. I think I was just so overwhelmed by that experience that I didn't even realize that it was coming like that sort of wave of...they were tears of like, oh my God, I can't believe that just happened. What a joyful experience and wow, life is so beautiful, you know, all of these things that I think a lot of us that have done a lot of contra dancing, both in roles that involve being onstage and also off, have at times, like... people that keep coming back to contra dancing, they have this experience of these moments of just joy, right? That was one of those moments of joy. I was in the joy when I was in it, and then when I came out of the joy I was like, "That was joy! I just had joy! Wow, that was such a special experience. What? Oh my gosh, I want more joy. "

**Julie Vallimont**

It could have been.

**Nils Fredland**

I mean, how many contra dances have you called, thousands?

**Nils Fredland**

Has to be. I don't know...I don't know how I would count that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you have any favorite contra dance memories? I mean, I did bring up the infamous crowd surfing incident, which you can talk about or not as you choose.

**Nils Fredland**

Like, that's the thing when I look at it, I kind of say, "Well, that happened, and it was fun." Those Glen Echo [Contrastock](https://fsgw.org/contrastock) dances that Penelope Weinberger organized, with a whole host of other people, but I think it was really her brainchild, doing that, with Will [Mentor], I think really solidified our friendship and collaboration in a new way. I had worked with him before, I was aware of his presence as a caller. I always really liked him, and then engaging in these events together, it was something that brought us into this brother relationship that exists now. I mean, I love Will, Will is such a close friend. It was really Will that said, "you have to do this," you know, the crowd surfing, and so we arranged it. I had talked to the musicians and then it was a moment. It was so weird. I still have this experience sometimes when I'll be calling a really big dance. I'll see people coming up the hall in lines of four down the hall, they'll turn and come up the hall. When I see all these faces moving up towards the stage, I'm like, I wonder if I could do that again? Noooo way! I'm not gonna do that again, I'm 40-whatever, 47 now. I don't know, it was a funny experience. I don't really know what to say about it. It was odd and it was exactly right, in that moment.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember hearing about it, and of course, watching video of it. To me, what was exciting was this, like, oh, man Nils is badass first of all, but then the thought of just being so in the moment, it's the same thrill of doing hash calling for squares or whatever, and I love that about Will. Will is someone who you can create things with in the moment. That is what is amazing about him. I love that working with him as a band. I feel like when we're on stage together, we're gonna make something, we're gonna grab a moment out of the ether and it's gonna be crazy, and we're gonna do it. We're not gonna judge whether it's good or not until long afterwards.

**Nils Fredland**

I love that so much. That's such a good way of saying it. I'm also really glad that you ended that by saying, we're not going to judge it until long afterwards or ever. I think that's what I really love about playing music for contra dances and participating as a caller, facilitating contra dances in that role. I think I heard Tony Parkes describe it as ephemeral art. I'm not sure if the those were the words that he used, but it happens and it's beautiful and then it's gone. Right? It lives in people's memories, it lives in people's hearts, it lives in their bodies. We have the opportunity as creators in this social dancing environment that is really powerful and community building, a community focused and fleeting, and then we do it again, and we do it again and we do it again and we do it again, and it's different every time, it's just so fascinating to me. The chance to talk about it having not had the opportunity to do it for nine months is powerful. I did not realize until this conversation how much I miss it. I didn't realize.

**Julie Vallimont**

Me too, sometimes. There are little things about it that can get tiring, or I could get burned out from a million booking emails and logistics and plane tickets and finances or whatever, just the logistics of making all these things happen behind the scenes and it's really nice to, just like you say, just be able to remember it in its purest form, which is the experience, which is the part that matters. When we ask musicians and callers to be professional contra musicians and callers, we're really asking them to go through all the things that it takes to get to the dance and don't even have to show all that, and then just show up on the stage and leave all of that behind and be there in the moment, even if you've just flown in on a red eye and you've been gone for two weeks straight and whatever, you don't have your luggage or whatever just happened to you.

**Nils Fredland**

I've had a lot of moments getting up on stage, I'm remembering one in particular, there's a great weekend in Berea, Kentucky, called the Hands Four Dance Weekend. I don't remember specifically why, but it was a nightmare travel for me to get there. I mean, wrong thing after mishap after... my trombone got lost, it was just a mess getting there. It was a long way from the airport to the hall and things were already going, and I was supposed to be calling, and I wasn't there, and they had to pinch hit for me. There was so much about it that was just stressful. I walked into the hall feeling stressed, and as soon as I stepped up on stage every bit of the stress of that day just was gone. There are other kind of performance experiences, you know, stage experiences that have that same sort of effect, but nothing quite like what I feel like when I arrive and pick up the microphone to call a dance. There really is something about that that's just like, oh, yeah, all right, I've arrived, everything's gonna be okay. It's like a nice coming home.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's really like kind of accessing this place inside. That sounds hokey, but it's like being transported. I've felt like that too. I could be so exhausted, been on airplanes or whatever, my body is killing me. You show up, you just soundchecked, maybe soundcheck didn't go that well, that sometimes happens. You're trying to make everything work, the first few notes come out and then I don't feel the pain in my body, I don't worry about anything that happened. I mean, that's why we all do it. When those nights are good and we're all in sync with the dancers and the caller and the musicians and the sound person and everybody else, it's just magic. It's nice to tap into that feeling. You must have so many stories from contra dance calling. I remember when I was a newer dancer going to the Scout House, and it was the Thursday [Cambridge, MA] dance that had moved to the Scout House, and Great Bear was playing, and the hall was so full people couldn't get in. You were the caller that night, and you were calling and everybody had their hands up and around them for when you were promenading your partner because there was no room. You had to modify the dances, just nights like that, I don't know, you presided over a lot of crazy memories for a lot of people.

**Nils Fredland**

Some of my favorite calling memories, they're really fun. It's fun to think about all those things. But I think some of my favorites are, like, weddings when people have never danced before. I remember calling a wedding with Elixir once, I think it was a Vermont wedding, and I was calling what I call the Borrowdale Exchange, which is, like, the six hands round and you put your right hands in to make the hands across star and then the left hands and everybody dives down to like, try to be the low hand pair. I'm sure you've seen me do it before. It's a great party dance, and there was something about this particular group of people that took that element of the dance, and they took it to a level that I have never seen it go to before. It wasn't a huge crowd, but they were just having so much fun. It made me laugh, it was one of those things where I was calling and I was trying to make sure that people knew what they were supposed to do next, but I couldn't keep myself from laughing into the microphone. They were having an experience that was joyful and they were laughing. They found themselves hilarious. It was made more funny by the fact that I found them hilarious. We were all laughing together, like the whole band was laughing. We were all just engaged in this communal experience of joy that I think defines a lot of what is great about it. It's funny, I listen to myself talk and I think, I do feel this way and I feel sort of compelled to dig into the archives and say, "and then there was this one time that was really crappy and I hated everything about it."

Sometimes I do have those experiences where I'm in a hall, and I'm recognizing that my energy is not something that the dancers can respond to in a positive way, for whatever reason, like I'm wearing something negative. I'm carrying that into my own presentation. The fact that there's a center set and it's twice as long as the other sets in the room is not because the dancers are doing something wrong, it's that there's something about the tone that I'm setting because of what I'm bringing, that is causing people to feel like they're digging their heels in. I'm always trying to think about how the experience is being affected by what I'm bringing and never blaming anything on the dancers for what is happening in the hall. It's a relationship, it's a collaboration, I think the hard nights are when I lose track of the fact that this is all born of a communal experience. When it's working really well, it is the dancers and the caller and the musicians all together. It's like you said earlier, it's not a performance. We're on stage and we're playing music and there's a big crowd of people that's enjoying the music that we're playing. So in that sense it kind of has that performance element but that's not what it's really designed to be. That, I think, makes it a really unique experience as a musician like we're used to being, I think, as performing musicians, we're used to being in environments, where many musicians are used to being in environments where they get up and play something and they're listened to and then they're appreciated. Playing for contra dances is I mean, it's great to get appreciation, but when you're doing it really well sometimes you have to generate your own appreciation based on what you're seeing, right? That can be sort of frustrating. I think as a caller, the role is just more visible. I can forget sometimes when I'm wearing my caller's hat that the musicians are maybe not feeling as much of that wash of appreciation as I do, just because I'm the one that happens to be holding the microphone, right? Will is actually really great about always making sure that he funnels that appreciation towards the band, like constantly, I love it. When it comes, he's making sure that the band is also receiving that. It's really important, because playing for dances is a really different kind of experience.

**Julie Vallimont**

You're talking about being aware that you're doing it for this communal experience you're creating. And if that isn't upheld by either the musicians or the caller or the dancers, then you don't get the full richness of that experience. There are lots of times when dancers forget or don't even know that their role is to have a communal experience with everyone else. As a caller, you take ultimate responsibility for what happens on the floor, but that center set was probably there the week before you got there, too.

**Nils Fredland**

Yes, it's true. There is a certain amount of change that you can affect by the energy that you bring, but dance communities do have their own personalities. I totally recognize that. I don't have any kind of delusions that I actually have control over what's going on in a hall. Like ever.

**Julie Vallimont**

This is sort of like the "customer is always right" thing that you have to do as a caller though.

**Nils Fredland**

Yeah, it's true.

**Julie Vallimont**

When I was first playing for contras or even just going and I wanted to play, I wanted to talk to these musicians, whether it was Nightingale, or Crowfoot... I idolized them. We became friends later, but I was so afraid to talk to them. It took me five dances to work up the courage to go stand by the stage and talk to them. Of course, now that I am a contra musician, we're so down to earth, mostly we love when people come and talk to us unless it's sound check, don't talk to me during soundcheck, but otherwise, come talk to me! We come into this with our external world perspective where music is a commodity that is created, that we purchase, and then we idolize these people in a weird way that distances us from them. It's easy to bring that mentality into a contra dance. I think that's what's so magical about dances where the dancers can sit on the stage, or sit behind the stage or, you know, like, blur those lines. In the smaller communities everyone knows the musicians and the caller and everyone knows each other, maybe. In a bigger city dance, where people are showing up and they don't know all this stuff and it's just an activity, it's easy to have that mindset. I don't always blame the dancers, if they don't know that they're part of a communal creation, because it might not occur to them.

**Nils Fredland**

Right, it's also a tricky balance, because there does need to be a certain amount of kind of boundary around the stage. There's expensive equipment up there, and you can't have people just kind of wandering up on stage. I think, especially as a caller, but I think any musician in a contra dance band that has kind of made the rounds, done some touring and played for some of the bigger dances, has this experience of both wanting to embrace the community and also needing to say, "this is my little special area." I need to preserve this both to protect my equipment and my bandmates' equipment, but also my own sort of personal energy, right? We're giving a lot, we're all sort of giving a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

When I'm playing, I'm hyper-focused on the dancers and I don't want to be distracted. This one dance weekend where the stage is the kind where you bring it in on risers, and they had it set up so the dancers could walk around all four sides of the stage. So while we're playing there's people behind us and to the left and the right and in front and I just felt like there's all this movement in my peripheral vision, and I'm so used to being hyper-focused on the dancers. It was really distracting for me.

**Nils Fredland**

Interesting.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sometimes when people have really loud conversations during a really quiet waltz, you have to tune some of that out as a performer. There's times where... yeah, so I hear that, it's that balance, for sure. I'm curious to get your perspective as a caller who is also a musician... and for contra dances, what do you think about....... I mean, I asked you kind of your ideal contra music and you mentioned good rhythm. More specifically, when you're talking about matching tunes to dances, how important is that to you? What's your role?

**Nils Fredland**

A lot of the work that I'm doing now happens with the band that I know so well, that knows me so well, that we have a very, very small vocabulary that is necessary to communicate what a dance needs. So, like, when I'm talking to Anna, and I do a lot of programming with Anna, but everybody kind of participates in that. If we're pre- programming a dance, I'll have some idea of what I want to do. I tend to think about contra dances in terms of arrival points and mood, right? Arrival points are things like balances, long lines forward and back. So those are like hard arrival points, right? Those are things that are "be here right now" kind of moments. Then there are arrival points that are soft arrival points, like entering into a circle or how long it takes to go from a circle into a swing, that will affect the choice of tune. Smooth or punchy, those kinds of adjectives come in, but a lot of it is more kind of descriptive of mood, especially when it comes to working with working with Elixir. I'll tease out any significant arrival points, mention those to Anna and say, "I'd like for this one to be one of our knock them over the head kind of high energy, rockin' things" or "we can be a little bit more gentle here." I think one of the things that defined my career early as a caller, the whole relationship of dance to music has evolved radically for me, because early on I wanted to look at my program and have the kind of arc of energy musically in my mind because I'm also a musician, right? This is the soundtrack that's playing in my head, like, I should know what to say about what I want. Because I'm a musician, and I know the music that's gonna best support this dance, and so approaching the conversation with this kind of edge. Like, "all right, so for the first dance, we're gonna want this thing and for the second dance it's going to be down the hall and so I want something that's marchy in the B part and definitely no jigs." I'm embarrassed to say, actually, how long I probably held on to that as my approach to describing the kind of dance to music relationship. Now, what I find most interesting and fun is if I can have an idea in my mind that I'm so not attached to that I'm able to say, here's this dance, here's what I have in my mind but I would love to know what you have in your mind, right? So it becomes more of a conversation.

That’s a luxury that I have with working with Elixir that I don't necessarily have working with other bands, but I do really like that approach. Some people that are listening may disagree with me here and I'm totally comfortable with that. A contra dance is 32 bars, and any 32-bar tune is gonna work with any 32-bar contra dance. That's kind of the bottom line, right? It might not be a peak experience for people but if the puzzle pieces fit together, you can get away with pretty much anything. I think approaching it with that sense of, nothing is really going to go horribly wrong if the tune and dance don't match exactly, has created this chance to be surprised. There was so long in the early part of my career when I wanted everything to go like I wanted it to go. Letting that go and having the opportunity to just be amazed by what all of these incredible musicians that I'm surrounded with when I call contra dances with any band. I mean, it's amazing how extraordinary the musicianship in the contra dance world is. So getting out of the way and letting the musicians do what they do, I think, has been the most satisfying part of understanding the relationship of dance to music, like letting other people teach me rather than being the one that dictates.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of it is also surrendering to that sense of "tonight or today or whatever is going to be its own unique experience." It's very easy, as a new band, we would have like, "oh, this tune worked perfectly with the dance." So next time a caller picked that dance we'd want to put the same tune set with it. But that element of magic may not come back that time because it's not just that tune and that dance. It's that caller in that hall in that moment in the night, and the temperature and the humidity, and Lord knows what else. We first learn what works, and then it's easy to be rigid about it and then when you reach your old age of contra playing, after you play your 500 dances then you can start to say, oh, I want to mess around with this. Buddy System and Will did a few things together and I'd be like, "okay, Will, I want you to call the same dance every night this week on our tour and I'm going to put a different tune with it every night and really explore" because somebody said to me, somebody smart was like, well, it can't be the wrong tune, it just brings out different parts of the dance. Maybe it was Andrew VanNorstrand, that seems like the kind of thing Andrew VanNorstrand would say.

**Nils Fredland**

It's really true, I think it's that feeling. I remember I was calling with Elixir in Seattle. This was years ago. I think I was just getting past that point of dictating to the point of being willing to just embrace whatever came. I remember I was always so uncomfortable starting off a night with a band playing a kind of gentle jig, especially at a big high-powered dance weekend where the expectations are high to have a sort of high energy wild twirly peak dancing experience. I love weekends that start off like that. But we entered into this weekend, I called the dance that I almost always call at the beginning of a contra dance weekend, we entered into this weekend with this really gentle, lovely, lilting jig. I was smiling to myself, a year ago, six months ago, I would be freaking out right now and right now I'm just enjoying the fact that this is happening. I'm not sure what else to say about it other than recognizing that moment as a little bit of a shift in terms of my own kind of relationship to what the possibilities are, so many possibilities. Those possibilities become much broader and more interesting the more sort of fluid I can be. The more acceptance you can muster the easier life gets.

**Julie Vallimont**

Deep. There's so many things that we think of as unwritten rules. I remember watching Adam and Jaige play in either Crowfoot or Maivish and just thinking, they play a lot of jigs, like a lot of jigs, I counted it several nights, almost 50% jigs. Why was that so scandalous to me? I feel like the rest of us have this unwritten rule that you play reels all night, maybe one set of marches and maybe two sets of jigs.

**Nils Fredland**

Two sets of jigs is a lot. I remember having that experience as a caller. Jaige and Adam are so dear to me, and I remember having that experience of calling with them and thinking, there are a lot of jigs. I think they've started nights with jigs and this was at a time when I definitely wasn't super comfortable with that. But, I hear you on that. I'm rambling a little bit, but these kind of unwritten rules that are broken by certain musicians wakes you up in a new way, like, "oh, that's possible, I can do that. I could do that."

**Julie Vallimont**

"That's really great, that thing, it's working really well." I remember when I was learning enough about some of the dances that I would begin to recognize them when the caller would say what it was at the mic. I started making mental notes of, especially dances that are more distinctive like Mary Cay's Reel. That's a David Kaynor dance, right? [It is.] I remember Crowfoot was playing at Ooh La La! [Dance Weekend], and it was Mary Cay's Reel and they just played this...—and that's a dance with a lot of movement. I think of it... it's like you need tunes with momentum, get yourself from place to place. They just played this grooviest set to it. It was the exact opposite of the mood I would have thought for it, and it was transcendent. It was amazing. I love when people bring out these whole other nuances of what a tune and dance pairing could be. It's really great.

**Nils Fredland**

It is pretty cool.

**Julie Vallimont**

While we're thinking of fun dances, we haven't talked about family dances very much at all, but I remember doing a few of those with you, speaking of fun times.

**Nils Fredland**

Those are great, sometimes they're really easy. It's like calling weddings, any kind of community dance that has a mix of people that have some experience at a dance floor, and no experience on a dance floor. And then also, a mix of expectations, right? Basically, what I'm trying to do when I'm calling any sort of community dance is to create an experience that everyone can engage in easily without having to think too hard, keep the teaching way, way, way down. To the extent that I do need to teach, having the teaching, not be standing in front and saying "and then you're going to do this and then you're going to do this," make it really lively, a sort of part of the community building experience. We can learn this thing together, and then we get to do this cool thing by taking what we've learned and putting it together with music, right? This is so great, it's all part of the journey. A big part of it is just having the right repertoire, or being willing to recognize that you have the wrong repertoire and ditching that and making something up. There's the big spirit of flexibility that I think is required in order for me, I think I have seen people, other callers, approach family dances in a completely different way that has worked brilliantly for the community that they're calling to and with their kind of style and approach. I think there's a lot we can learn from each other and there's no right way to do it. The right way to do it is paying attention to the people that you have in front of you and giving them an experience that they leave saying, "boy, that was really fun." If you've accomplished that, whether you did two dances and expected to do 12, or 15 dances and expected to do four, I've been in both situations where you run a dance three times through and everybody's like, okay, what's the next one? You're chugging through all of your repertoire and then you're making stuff up because they're so enthusiastic, or you have a crowd that can't seem to learn the thing that you were certain that they would be able to learn like that. So you're working with one dance and when they have that dance experience, when they finally get it, they're like, "oh, my God, that was the best." Being willing to let go, like, have a plan, be willing to let go of it, and make sure that the people that you have in front of you are having a good time. If those things are accomplished. I chalk up any community dance experience as a success. I love those dances. Those are super fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, they are magic. So I'm curious to ask you, just taking a bit of a perspective over how you've seen the dance scene change over the years that you've been in it and any observations that you have and where it might be headed, those kind of thoughts.

**Nils Fredland**

You had mentioned that you might ask something like this, and I don't know what I would say about that. I had an opportunity to think about what I would say about that, and now faced with the question, I don't really know what to say about that.

**Julie Vallimont**

There may be more meaningful ways to ask that question, like on a smaller scale.

**Nils Fredland**

No, please I would just be talking right now. Not my favorite thing to do, to hear myself talk.

**Julie Vallimont**

How has music changed, specifically? Like, in the beginning you mentioned there not being a lot of trombonists playing at the time. It doesn't mean there hadn't been any. There had been bands with horns in them going way back, but things come and go, and there just happened to not be any at the time that you started. Elixir was a certain thing when it started. Maybe there weren't a lot of bands with horns at that moment. So how has the music changed in bands that you've seen come and go? How has all that changed in your tenure?

**Nils Fredland**

I think something that I see more frequently now is people recognizing a need that in their mind needs to be filled and thinking way outside of the box of possible ways to fill that need. I think about Jeff Kaufman, who does so many interesting things and is such a creative thinker that has a tech background. I don't know Jeff that well, and so I'm saying these things like I know how he thinks, and I really don't. My impression is that when he recognizes a gap or a problem or something that he sees taking shape in a particular way, if the path forward isn't clear, the possibilities of approaching that particular issue are completely wide open, like "what crazy thing can I do that's going to fill what I have identified as this gap that I want to fill?" I don't even know what to call the various tools, like the kind of stomp board percussion sounds that have come up in a number of different bands. Like we need something with a little bit of thump here. We don't have a percussionist per se, but I'm gonna amplify this footboard and crank it up with a bunch of bass and it's gonna sound like a kick drum.

**Julie Vallimont**

A little different than foot percussion. The Mean Lids used one, Jeff Kaufman has used one in Free Raisins, in his various bands. Perpetual e-Motion had a foot sound kinda like that.

**Nils Fredland**

Those guys, in a lot of ways, they sort of changed everything.

**Julie Vallimont**

Ed [Howe] and John [Coté].

**Nils Fredland**

Yeah, there have always been things that have been moving towards outside of the box, like exploring the possibilities. What they brought into the mix was just so different than anything else that had really happened before. It was a little bit unsettling, I think. I mean, I love both of them. I didn't always love calling with Perpetual e-Motion. Did I just say that? No, I had some really peak experiences, and I also had some experiences where I was like, "this feels hard," you know? They were so committed to their vision of what could be that I think in some ways it inspired other people to shake off whatever might have been holding them back in some respects. I don't want to place too much... pressure is the wrong word, I don't want to place too much on their presence. And John's... Perpetual e-Motion's presence in the contra dance world as being, like, a path-altering moment. I do think it got people, certainly got me, thinking about things in a new kind of way. And then I love what I see happening with young bands. You know, I'm getting a little tired now. Sorry. I've just realized.

**Julie Vallimont**

The brain fog.

**Nils Fredland**

This is probably the hardest question you've asked so far, so the fact that it's coming at the end is a little bit tough. I'll try to finish this thought, what I was gonna say was, starting with Elixir, which is now coming up on 14–15 years with our current lineup, and stretches back a little bit earlier than that, so pushing 20 years. The repertoire that was new for us that lasted as new repertoire in the contra dance scene, like a new sound in the contra dance world for years and years and years and years is now, I've had experiences on the dance floor or listening to another band that I'm sharing the bill with at a dance weekend, where I'll hear a different take on a tune that I've been playing with Elixir for 10 years. It's always really interesting to me to hear how that evolution takes place. What do other people hear when they listen to this particular tune? I think that process has been happening forever, right? This is not anything new. But in this moment, and my experience as a musician in the contra dance world right now, the experience of being part of a band that is now considered, like, traditional. Hearing what the newer bands are doing with music that comes from the traditional Elixir repertoire is an indication, I think, of just how much creativity there continues to be in the world of contra dance music. I don't have any doubt that things are going to continue to change and evolve in ways that we might be able to predict and also ways that are gonna be crazy outside of the box. It just feels like a lot of possibility. That's what it feels like to me. I hope to be around for a long time to see it all evolve. When we just had this Monterey concert, the California Zoom concert that I mentioned before with Elixir, I definitely had a moment of wondering what it would be like to celebrate 40 years with that band.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow.

**Nils Fredland**

We had the pleasure of playing as a guest band at the Swallowtail 30th anniversary weekend in Massachusetts a number of years ago. There's some sense of what it's like for a band to be together for that long, to kind of know each other that well. I mentioned Elixir and my feeling about Elixir as being family. I get that same sense from a band like Swallowtail, and while I can't predict the future, I hope that I'm able to play for contra dances with Elixir for another 15–20 years, whatever. I think there's a lot about that that certainly speaks to the relationships in the band and the music that we made together. It's also the context in which we have chosen to make most of our music, like in this world of playing for dances, I love the fact that there is a place for new, and there's also a place for like for I don't know, why am I hesitating to say it, there's also a place for old, right? Like, it's great. There's appreciation for both of those things, like really honest just genuine love and appreciation for the stuff that's been around for a really long time, and that continues to move, march along in the same way that it's always been. Like equal appreciation and enthusiasm for the stuff that is breaking new ground and setting new energy, like creating new sounds. All of these things are moving along in tandem. It's a great thing. We can all kind of be on the path together and appreciate what we're all doing. As one of the old guys, I don't feel like I'm being pushed aside, which is great. I think it's cool.

**Julie Vallimont**

People made room for us, and we make room for others. I love your positivity, saying that it feels like things are wide open in terms of what the future of contra music could hold. Because sometimes it's easy, if you did like a checklist, it's like, well, it's all been done, we've done all these different kinds of tunes from all over the world, we've done techno, and we've done looping, we've done this, and that, and drum sets, and hand drums, and horns. But that's not where the newness comes from. We don't have to try so hard for it to be new, it will be new, as long as there are new people doing it with love and care. Like you say, these tunes, they're like a conduit that gets filtered through people and each person who plays it changes it in their own way and makes it their own. In that sense, there's infinite newness and it doesn't have to be as new as like being the Perpetual e-Motion who's creating a whole new way of playing looping for contra dance or being techno contra or anything. There's a lot of more subtle ways to be new that are deep and rich and shouldn't be overlooked.

**Nils Fredland**

That's a really great way to say it.

**Nils Fredland**

You know what, Julie? I started this conversation a little tired because it's late. I have to say that I have been so engaged by the opportunity to talk about my own experience and to be with you and soaking up your interest and enthusiasm and appreciation for this thing that we do together. So thank you for asking me, and I've really, really enjoyed the conversation and I hope that you're able to find some useful bits from it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Definitely. The pleasure is all mine. Thank you so much Nils.

**Nils Fredland**

A real pleasure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Take care.

**Nils Fredland**

Thanks, Julie.

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