Contra Pulse Episode 24 – Rodney Miller

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra Pulse, this is Julie Vallimont. This week we speak with legendary fiddler, violin maker and tunesmith Rodney Miller. Designated a “Master Fiddler” in 1983 by the National Endowment for the Arts, Rodney Miller is widely considered to be the foremost exponent of New England style fiddling, a uniquely American blend of French Canadian and Celtic influences. Over the past 35 years, he has toured the U.S., British Isles, Australia and Denmark, performed and taught at hundreds of music and dance festivals, and recorded numerous fiddle albums. Rodney’s playing and numerous albums over the past 40 years have had a defining impact on New England fiddle music. From the New England Chestnuts albums, Airplang, Airdance, and many more, Rodney’s playing has showcased tradition and innovation in equal measure.

In addition to his dance playing, over his career Rodney has performed nationwide at venues such as Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C., “A Prairie Home Companion,” the Lincoln Center in New York, and was recorded for an album by the National Geographic Society.

In March 2014, Rodney Was granted a two-year appointment as the Artist Laureate of New Hampshire.

Today Rodney lives in California and is an actively touring musician with band’s such as the Stringrays, the Rhythm Raptors, and the Backwater Boys (well before COVID, at least)

IN our interview over zoom Rodney talks about his musical childhood and how he discovered violin, his introduction to the dance scene, how he learned from the older generation of fiddlers in New Hampshire. He breaks down his unique fiddle style and bow hold, talks about his tune writing process, and talks about how he made some of his seminal albums over the years, and much more!

As a bonus, there’s a video excerpt from our zoom call where he demonstrates his fiddle technique. you can find it on our website at [www.cdss.org/contrapulse](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse). Hope you enjoy!

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hello, Rodney Miller, and welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Rodney Miller**

Hi, Julie. How are you doing?

**Julie Vallimont**

I am so excited to talk with you. I've been very excited about this. We talk to you in California, I guess. Is that where you are these days?

**Rodney Miller**

Yeah, I'm in Sonoma, California wine country.

**Julie Vallimont**

That sounds beautiful. We just had two feet of snow today in New England. I know that's what New England is all about but I'm already over it.

**Rodney Miller**

Yeah, we didn't get any of the snowflakes here. I'm sorry.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'll save you some. Well, I'm sure you've had your share of New England snowfalls over the years. You have played more contra dances than I can even imagine. Do you have any idea how many dances you've played in your lifetime?

**Rodney Miller**

I don't really have an idea.

**Rodney Miller**

If I've been doing it for 50 years and there were 50 dances a year. That's 2,500 I think.

**Rodney Miller**

I know from personal acquaintances that not all fiddlers enjoy or want to play for contra dances because it's pretty long and hard task to play for two to three hours really strongly.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's physically demanding.

**Rodney Miller**

It is.

**Julie Vallimont**

How has that been for you over the years?

**Rodney Miller**

Well, funny, you should ask because I've just had ulnar nerve surgery in my right arm and it's directly due to bowing for so many years really hard. So I was losing sensitivity in my right hand and strength of grip. But I did have the operation a couple months ago and I'm back.

**Julie Vallimont**

That must feel good.

**Rodney Miller**

I feel like a sports star, like you do it enough and you're gonna get injured.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, it's kind of true. Like there's wear and tear on our bodies. I know people who have back injuries from doing foot percussion, guitarists with all sorts of tendinitis. A lot of fiddlers get stuff in their shoulders. You know, it's a labor of love.

**Rodney Miller**

It is.

**Julie Vallimont**

I would love to hear how you got started playing the fiddle and how you eventually got started playing for contra dances.

**Rodney Miller**

I think I began fiddling and playing for dances in a previous lifetime is my feeling about it. I was looking back through some of my family history records. My dad's mother, so that would be my paternal grandmother, Elvira Widrig Miller did some research on the family lines and came up with all kinds of interesting details. She ended up marrying Ralph Warren Miller. So that would be my dad's dad. He bought a violin in Utica, New York in 1907, on lease so he had to pay $25 a month for two or three years before he owned the violin. That instrument was passed on to me, that's what I learned on at age seven when I started playing. I wasn't as tall as I am now. I mean, I'm 6’5”- that's my mature height. But when I was seven, I was just average height. It was like learning on a viola because they didn't have the small size violins back then that I was aware of and nobody did anything about it.

**Julie Vallimont**

What was your opinion about it as a kid? Were you excited about it being a family heirloom?

**Rodney Miller**

Oh, yeah, I was so excited. My mom was a professional musician. She grew up playing piano. There were four of us kids and two older brothers and they didn't get the violin. I inherited it. She kept it in mind for me, apparently, so I felt very proud to receive it and start playing. It was an honor.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's led you to this lifelong relationship with fiddles, even making them.

**Rodney Miller**

Yeah, for better or for worse, I've made decisions in terms of careers. One was that I got a civil engineering degree at the University of New Hampshire in 1976 and worked as a civil engineer in Keene, New Hampshire for three years before deciding that really what my true passion was playing fiddle and making violins. I just pursued that from 1979 on. It's really hard to make a living as you might experience, gigging all the time and traveling around. The money isn't all that great. One of the things, I was trying to create was a mathematical formula for how much you got paid for a dance and how many miles you had to travel. This was back when I was playing [the Nelson dance](http://www.monadnockfolk.org/?page_id=63) in the early 70s. Nelson was approximately 30 miles down the road from Antrim, New Hampshire, where I lived. The pay was $30 so I thought, well, you get $1 for a one-way trip to a gig, I'll see if that works. Then I was driving to Boston, which is like 90 miles and kind of made $90 for this gig. So it was kind of holding true.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's so many adages about that, there's the one where you drive hundreds of miles to get paid tens of dollars. There's also the one, there was a blues musician, when they said, "What do you do for a living?" he said, "Well, I drive a lot and sometimes I get to play music when I get there."

**Rodney Miller**

Then, of course, what [Bob McQuillen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_McQuillen) made famous was [the saying that: “Playing music was like being paid to eat ice cream.”]

**Julie Vallimont**

Which is wonderful. But he had a day job.

**Rodney Miller**

Well we kind of have to, I certainly had to because I ended up being a violin maker with a paycheck every week. That helps.

**Julie Vallimont**

How many violins have you made?

**Rodney Miller**

A couple hundred, easily. Still doing it out here in Ca. There's no retirement for musicians that I know of, or violin makers. Just keep doing it. I think what happened was there was a strong folk interest roots in my family. My mom, besides playing piano, made quilts, and my father was a minister for a number of churches, Presbyterian. We traveled a lot because he went to different churches for one reason or another and my mom was usually the pianist organist for the church that he would take over and she was very oriented to making quilts and making things, sewing with her hands. My dad was a woodworker as a hobby and there was always a wood shop in the basement. I would make things out of wood from a very early age.

**Rodney Miller**

We listened back then to AM radio and my oldest brother, Ralph, was really into banjo, five string banjo. We used to listen to WSM, I think that's the Wheeling West Virginia jamboree on a Saturday night and sometimes actually pulled down the Grand Ole Opry from upstate New York. That was part of the entertainment in my household, listening to folk music and early bluegrass and old time music. My mom grew up in Bluefield, West Virginia. There's a southern connection there for me too. One of the favorite family activities was to go to what they called the fiddler's picnics. I can remember going after church on Sunday, everybody in the old station wagon and driving down to Canandaigua, New York, where there was a fairground.

**Julie Vallimont**

I grew up about half an hour from there.

**Rodney Miller**

No kidding, where?

**Julie Vallimont**

I grew up in Honeoye, this very tiny town south of Rochester.

**Rodney Miller**

Honeoye, beautiful area. Is Seneca Falls nearby too?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that was where my doctor was. I had to go to the doctor in Seneca Falls.

**Rodney Miller**

No kidding.

**Julie Vallimont**

One of my aunts did fiddling out there. I think it was Fiddlers of the Genesee, something like that, they had a fiddling group. I didn't know any of that when I was a kid. I wasn't around it. So it's just so cool to think that you had been going to these places that I knew nothing about while I was living there.

**Rodney Miller**

So if you've ever been to fiddler picnics, you know that when a lot of fiddlers get up on stage, or just start jamming in the parking lot, back then, which was early 60s, late 50s, they’d play Soldier's Joy, Fisher's Hornpipe, Golden Slippers, Ragtime Annie, those are the tunes that were ingrained in my head about fiddle music. It developed from there and progressed to the New England repertoire which includes all of those tunes. it's a northern-sounding repertoire, and I think even crossing into the southern repertoire roots of music.

**Julie Vallimont**

At the time, were those tunes the hot new tunes or were they the standby stalwarts?

**Rodney Miller**

Ragtime Annie was the show tune as I remember. Later on I was influenced and had as a friend, Allan Block, the old time fiddler who made sandals and belts and lived in New York City. He had a summer place in Francestown, New Hampshire and I think he was one I heard play a three part version of Ragtime Annie with a G part at the end. It's in the key of D. So two parts in D, but end up with a G part that was kind of cool. Then repeat. So it got kind of fancy actually for being old time standard repertoire.

**Rodney Miller**

So when I was in high school, there was a movie, Bonnie and Clyde, that came out, a very popular movie, and the background music was Flatt and Scruggs playing Foggy Mountain Breakdown. Wow. I was playing like Chicken Reel and all this sort of repertoire stuff, standard stuff. And then my soccer schoolmate Larry Eaton, we had gone to the movie together, we were sophomores or juniors in high school, after seeing the movie, he came away and he said, I'm going to learn the banjo, that is so cool. Within a year, he was just an incredible banjo player. He bought a gold tone, master tone banjo. We formed a band in high school and competed at the variety show and won 50 dollars for playing the Chicken Reel.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you have a recording of that anywhere?

**Rodney Miller**

No, it was a crowd pleaser, everybody was stomping and clapping. I knew that there was a mine of money behind the music, and interesting too. That led to our forming a bluegrass band, we called ourselves the Genesee Valley Ramblers because we were in Rochester and up on the lake there, Irondequoit. We got some local bar gigs at age 16. The owners let us play music Friday nights while people were drinking. I don't know if they would allow that today.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's exciting for a teenager.

**Rodney Miller**

When I was looking at colleges to go, my older brother [Randy](https://www.fiddlecasebooks.com/about-the-publisher.html) was at Oberlin College in Ohio. It's just southwest of Cleveland. I went out my senior year to take a look at the college, to consider it, that and RIT, and I met the old time band that was there at Oberlin. There was a rich folk club tradition there with bluegrass in the 50s and the 60s, folk revival stuff. There was an old time clawhammer banjo player named Tom Hammond, who was a senior. I was coming in as a freshman, but when I went out there, I was going to sign up to play basketball like my older brother, who had been recruited to play basketball. They just really wanted me to come because they were losing their fiddler the next fall, and they wanted me desperately be the fiddler in the old time band. So that was a sealer no doubt. I just had to go. We formed a band while I was there, Fiddling Rod and the Totalo Ticklers. Played concerts in Finney Chapel.

**Julie Vallimont**

So many people in our folk scene have passed through Oberlin, so many people still. I have so many friends who went to school there and met there and got into singing or playing tunes or playing for contra dances. I think half the Pinewoods crew in any given year has been to Oberlin. It's amazing.

**Rodney Miller**

Oberlin was kind of what you were describing, a sort of open college. They had just abolished grades when I came in. You could make up your own major and I decided to make up my own major of ethnomusicology and art, like studio art. I know there's a Conservatory of Music at Oberlin, but I was not part of that at all. My ethnomusicology teacher was experiencing my questions like, "Can we study fiddle music, can we do this, can we do that?" She said, "Well, I don't know a lot about that but I think you should do a project because there's a winter term project coming up. You're a freshman, I think you can get a grant of money to go to wherever you want and record fiddle music." So I was like on it. Winter term in 1970, I got, I think it was $300 and the use of a college Wollensak reel to reel tape recorder. I made connections with Clem Meyer up in Barre Vermont. He was the president of the Northeast Fiddler's Association. He said, yeah, come up and visit and you should meet Neil Converse who's up in Plainfield because he plays the old time style. I went up there and I did some recording, I have tapes of it that are still reel to reel.

**Rodney Miller**

That sort of brings me up to in my recent moves from New Hampshire to Sonoma, California. I came across an old cassette that is a snatch of the reel to reel tape I made with Neil Converse, who was then in his late 80s I believe. He was a dairy farmer. Small farmhouse right near Plainfield, Vermont. He was gracious and I went over and we played tunes and I listened to his history and recorded stuff. It's where I picked up some of the early repertoire like the Green Mountain Petronella that is the variant of Petronella which is I think, Scottish in derivation and has the chestnut dance Petronella that we all know about. The Green Mountain Petronella came from Neal Converse, and he taught it to me in his living room. He also introduced me to tunes like Hull's Victory and he had been connected with the [Ed Larkin dancers](https://www.ourherald.com/articles/ed-larkins-famous-dance-troupe-turns-80/). Ed Larkin was a dance caller in Vermont through the years. A lot of the repertoire was coming into my now enlarged fiddle tune repertoire. I was thinking maybe playing a little snatch from the cassette that I found. Are you up for hearing some of that, Julie?

**Julie Vallimont**

That would be wonderful. That sounds really exciting.

**Rodney Miller**

All right, let me get my cassette box. The only thing that can play cassettes that I now own.

**Julie Vallimont**

So for the listener, Rodney is actually grabbing a boombox and holding it up to his microphone. Oh, I missed the days of cassettes.

**Rodney Miller**

So this goes on for a few minutes and he's going to eventually talk about the Green Mountain Petronella, but he starts off by playing Hull's Victory and you can hear the salty old Yankee style of playing and about when he was active in the 1920s and 30s. What was going on back then. [fiddle music playing] You can hear his floor furnace in the background. [fiddle music playing] So this is where Neil Converse is teaching me the tune. I was playing along. [fiddle music]

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow.

**Rodney Miller**

Do you want to hear me play it now?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, please.

**Rodney Miller**

In my ripe old age.

**Julie Vallimont**

We're in luck, Rodney has his fiddle. [Rodney plays fiddle]

**Rodney Miller**

Not a lot has changed over the years there.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was wondering, has the way you played it changed at all over the years?

**Rodney Miller**

Well, obviously, if you compare that to Neil's version, I have a few more trills and rolls in there. I sort of fill in the spaces a little bit more. That's kind of been my style, fill the spaces in. When I was at Oberlin, this is how I got into playing for dances, really. There was a next year older classmate, Jane Wilk. She had grown up going to [Pinewoods Camp](https://www.pinewoods.org/) on Cape Cod. And she knew, had heard, that I was the fiddler with this old time band coming in as a freshman, and she said, “Rodney, you're gonna play for my dances because I'm going to call dances at Oberlin and we're going to do a student dance scene,” and I said, “Okay.” And so we played for dances, and then she told me, after we'd done that two or three times, you have to go to Pinewoods camp. They are going to like you and you're going to like it.

**Rodney Miller**

So that very summer I went to Pinewoods and I went on scholarship as a dishwasher. I stayed one week and then they said, okay, you can stay another week and so that was like a non - ending relationship. There I met May Gadd who was playing snare drum at the evening dances in C Sharp. I was sitting in with the band at that point and then came back the following summer to teach fiddle and met [Dudley Laufman](https://dudleylaufman.com/) and he invited me to do his summer gig schedule up in New England, New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine. I drove around with him to many consecutive gigs, every weekend. He was a very popular and busy caller of the time, sort of coming in and forging a way as Ralph Page was getting older. Ralph passed in early 80s while Dudley was popular and coming on because he had been part of the whole Ralph Page, Bob McQuillen dance scene in Peterborough and the area back in the 50s. So Dudley has done his work as well.

**Rodney Miller**

So, anyway, that sort of evolved into going to the Nelson dance where Newt Tolman and Kay Gilbert were playing every month for a Saturday contra dance. As they were aging and Newt had a little bit of a sobriety problem, Natalie McClure, who was the organizer for that dance, asked if me and my brother Randy would take over playing for the dance. So we did in the early 70s. It became, I think, our first regular contra dance gig every single month for a few years in a row. She had connections, she had connections to [Alvah Batchelder](https://bangordailynews.com/2015/07/07/news/bangor/stradivarius-of-frankfort-subject-of-talk-at-waldo-peirce-reading-room/) and different fiddlers that used to play in Nelson in the past and played me some old recordings that her father had, not Natalie’s father, but Alvah Batchelder's daughter lived right next to the town hall in Nelson, invited me over and played some scratchy old 78s that her dad had been on.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that a connection to the tune Batchelders?

**Rodney Miller**

Yeah, well, there was also Al Quigley. I'm thinking maybe I was saying that Al Quigley's daughter was the one who played me the recordings. But Alvah Batchelder had also been one of the players. He was, I think, from Maine and maybe came down and played occasionally, but Quigley was the regular. Anyway, so with all these connections, you can see how ingrained I was becoming in the whole contra dance scene.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you were learning to play for dances just by doing it, who were the biggest people that you learned from? What did you get from each of them?

**Rodney Miller**

Newt Tolman played flute and Kay Gilbert played piano. They published the Nelson Collection of contra dance tunes that was sort of the bible of the time for musicians wanting to play. There are roots in it back to Cole's 1001 fiddle tune book that came out in the 1880s. It was a very popular book that had a lot of like flatted hornpipes and reels. That related to the fact that a lot of these small towns in New Hampshire and Vermont had town bands and they had trumpets and coronets that became popular instruments to play at the dances too.

**Rodney Miller**

So there were a number of tune collections that came out with all the flatted tunes, tunes, like Hull's Victory in the key of F or Lady Walpole's Reel in B flat, all of those kinds of tunes, the Saratoga Hornpipe, all had roots back to the 1800s. I just wanted to also say that New Hampshire was one of the places where contra dances never really did die out from the Revolutionary War days on. They were continuously run. They were also popular in Boston in colony ages, and became out- of-popular use in the mid 1800s, when ballroom dancing came in strongly. The organized orchestras were playing and people could dress up in gowns and tuxes and go out on the town. Contra dance became sort of the country cousin to it all. It never really fell out in New Hampshire, it was always sort of this community gathering, with a potluck. Also the nature of the contra dances back then were much simpler than they are now. A lot of dances where the lead couple was the active couple, the second couple down and the fourth, were inactive, and you didn't do a whole lot if you were inactive.You’re just waiting your turn to get to the top of the line and then progress down. It was a different sort of mindset and a lot of inactive time in between. So you get done with a dance and then you might visit with your neighbors on the side and then come back and dance. A little different than it is now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sounds kind of fun, honestly. I like dances where there's a little downtime once in a while. It's easier to get to know the people around you in line and have a conversation with somebody or do a little dancing steps or whatever, have a flirtation even.

**Rodney Miller**

I used to do gigs with [Ralph Page](http://www.socalfolkdance.org/master_teachers/page_r.htm) who was probably the most famous dean of contra dances, dance calling. He actually went to Japan I think a couple of times as an emissary to show contra dance as an American heritage. Of course he employed Bob McQuillen back then. I don't know if too many people know that Ralph Page wrote quite a few fiddle tunes and thought of himself as a fiddler until he became more of a caller all the time. He wrote the famous McQuillen's Squeezebox tune. When I was working with them and visiting Ralph at his home on Washington Street in Keene, he was always telling me stories about how, say, he had this French Canadian fiddler [Johnny Carignan](https://folkways-media.si.edu/liner_notes/folkways/FW03532.pdf) at his summer camp over in, I think it was Fitzwilliam or one of the towns south of Keene where he had summer dance weeks. He hired Jean Carignan to come and play and he would rave to me, “He never played Money Musk the same way twice and he played it seven times.”

**Rodney Miller**

This is all feeding into my young mind like okay, I get it. This (improvisation) makes for interesting music and here I am playing for the Nelson dance at that time, the early 70s. We were playing one or two tunes for maybe a 15 minute long contra dance and thinking maybe a switch tune in the middle might be a good idea so you can play a different tune after seven or eight minutes. It also got my mind going, like, how am I going to do this long term and stay sane? I started to think in terms of what can I change. I can change the melody a little bit or I could change the rhythm bowing, that kind of thing. It kind of became interesting to me and it kept it vital, I think, which was an important thing, to keep it interesting and vital if you're going to do this long term. Dudley Laufman wrote a lot of tunes that we were playing, tunes like Glenn Towle. His Mistwold tune, that came from his background where he worked on a farm in Massachusetts called Mistwold, That was important to him. He wrote a tune to reflect that importance of place and thing, it created this whole environment for me to actually explore writing tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

What were some of your first tunes?

**Rodney Miller**

Well, they were sort of on the edge, actually. I had just come off a cross country tour with [Tod Whittemore](https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/843) and [Andy Davis](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-18-andy-davis/). Andy was playing piano on the trip. Tod was the caller, a popular caller in Boston at the time and set up gigs all across the US and we drove. Took a whole month to do it and back. Andy Davis was just an awesome musician. He, in his background, was really interested in early jazz pieces, some of the song heritage from the 1930s and 40s but also the early Stephane Grappelli stuff with Django Reinhardt. He invited me to come over to his place in South Acworth after our tour was over and continue playing music together. He wanted me to hear this early jazz and pulled out some records and played them and then he said, it's not that hard, just do it. So as a result of that first session of playing some jazz with Andy, I came back to the house and wrote [Contrazz](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_kA7WqUoQcpjm6tWyZIlOP6BQi6JRfcfZc). I think that was probably the first tune I wrote. It was a tune that was meant to be half jazz and half contra dance music. That was pretty exciting when I did it. I think that was 1983.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you play it for any of the old timers then? What did they think of it?

**Rodney Miller**

I ended up recording it on my album Airplang which came out in 1985, so soon after. I had been playing with [Kate Barnes](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-9-kate-barnes/), quite a bit in Boston with Tod Whittemore calling and sort of expanding. We'd just done the two New England Chestnut albums, 1980 and 81 with my brother and [Sandy Bradley](https://squaredancehistory.org/items/show/715) and [George Wilson](http://georgewilsonmusic.com/), and accordion players Steve Woodruff and Laurie Andres. I'd used Ralph Page as a reference and CDSS had backed the projects with Alcazar record’s Joan Pelton. Those two albums were recorded as a representation of classic New England dance music and also indicated the dances that were to go with it as well. I was expanding and getting into improvisation within the traditional fiddle window. When I recorded Airplang with [Russ Barenberg](https://russbarenberg.com/), [Molly Mason](http://jayandmolly.com/about/), and Kate Barnes, that was my breakout, writing tunes, recording my tunes, some of them, and just putting a new sort of flavor on the whole dance scene. I included a drummer, Tim Jackson, from Boston who was a popular drummer. So it was kind of groundbreaking in a way. We would play at the VFW Hall in Cambridge with Tod calling and Russ Barenberg would come and sit in and we'd have this kind of inventive, lively band going. Kind of shaped my whole future.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sounds like a lot of fun. In the span of a few years you made several seminal albums, like truly seminal albums, but in very different ways. First the New England Chestnuts albums, which, when I learned to play, I played along with those records. They're still what a lot of people go to for a reference and then to go from that to Airplang which is also a seminal album in its own right. What a few years.

**Rodney Miller**

It's an expression that has to come out if you're going to continue as an artist, if you call yourself an artist, and you're developing your music. Things have to happen. It's just a natural progression. Of course, later on, that led to different bands like the Rodney Miller Band with some of the Hillbillies from Mars people in California, Daniel Steinberg and Paul Kotapish and David Cahn up in Seattle playing bass. That was a really fun band to be part of too. That was in the late 80s. Then the whole Airdance band scene was created around the year 1999 to 2001. Pat Baker and Betty Ann Sather, a couple, came to me and wanted to create [Great Meadow Music](https://www.greatmeadowmusic.com/). They wanted to use my library of recordings as a basis for their company based in Westmoreland, New Hampshire. That got the whole Airdance band going with [David Surette](http://www.burkesurette.com/david) and [Mary Cay Brass](https://marycaybrass.com/) and [Stuart Kenney](http://www.stuartkenney.com/), my old friend, Stuart. That led to three Airdance recordings through Great Meadow Music. They wanted to put out music that was vibrant and that represented where the whole contra dance scene was at, at that point in time.

**Julie Vallimont**

It was just amazing. I was talking in another interview about Great Meadow specifically, and how important that was for kind of capturing that moment in time. That was one of the great areas of contra dance music in New England. Now, when contra musicians make albums, we all have to do Kickstarters or GoFundMe’s or fund them ourselves. It's a different world now, especially when albums often don't pay for themselves. There's a lot of music that could get made that doesn't get made, because there isn't anyone to fund it.

**Rodney Miller**

Right. Obviously, things like Kickstarter help people gather some money to make recordings and put out their music. It has to do with the dance community and the music community, the contra dance music community and CDSS and Pinewoods camp traditions and all of that. So people support it by buying CDs, once you've produced them. You have to produce them somehow. This whole COVID experience has changed everything once again, so now you're on your own as a dance musician or fiddler or whatever you play, kind of roots music, and how do you make that work, if at all. You have to learn new skills, new technological skills, I now have a home recording setup. Six months ago, I had no clue how to do that and now I'm able to just make a recording that I'd say is pretty high caliber, considering it's done at home. I think a lot of other musicians are finding that out too, and able to survive in some manner through GoFundMe. Bandcamp is a popular place to market.

**Julie Vallimont**

The community has been very supportive, which is wonderful. Well, you've been working on a tune book recently, have you been taking advantage of your time in one place to work on this project?

**Rodney Miller**

That's a project that I don't think would have happened in my previous life in NH, but it's occupying a lot of my present life. Since Contrazz was written in 1983, it's been non stop progress coming to an actual publication of my tune book of 270 original fiddle tunes, which I just released last week. This is December of 2020, okay, so it took almost 50 years. That's been a lovely project.

**Rodney Miller**

There's a quote in the beginning of the book, I think that applies, which is why I put it there. It's by Jean Cocteau. He was a filmmaker and artist 1889 to 1963. He wrote, "All good music resembles something, good music stirs by its mysterious resemblance to the objects and feelings which motivated it." I have found over and over that all the tunes that I've written are influenced by people, places and things in my life, relationships and visits to Australia and the UK. Whatever it is that stirs your inner emotion can result, at least for me, in a musical idea or expression. I've been very fortunate that people have supported the project all along, musicians like Daniel Steinberg on board, or Melissa Coffey, who transposed versions of my tunes from hand scratches on paper with Sandy Gillette's help. Daniel put them in Sibelius, which is a publishable format and offered his services to review chords. In the last year and a half, I've made 20 trips to Santa Cruz down the coast where Daniel lives, and we've gone over each and every tune in person.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a big project.

**Rodney Miller**

I'll say.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is it hard to decide what the chords are?

**Rodney Miller**

I have a pretty good idea in my mind what I like to hear. I'm not a chord person. I'm a melody player. I do understand some chords because I've written a lot of my tunes on mandolin, surprisingly, because a mandolin has frets and you can outline chords more easily than on a fiddle. Obviously, I've written a lot of them on the fiddle. I have in my head the ideas about a new melody that I want to hear. Daniel was skillful in offering me several options from his own repertoire of chords and sensibilities to what I'm accustomed to hearing and want to hear too. It was pretty exciting to put it all together. A lot of other musicians have influenced me, all the players I've played with. David Surette, Mary Cay, Jeff Spero from LA to name a few, all these people have been influences and put their own brand of flavor on things.

**Julie Vallimont**

You've played with some pretty amazing rhythm sections over the years. Seems like that's something that you actively look for in a band. Do you want to say more about that?

**Rodney Miller**

Well, initially, the sound that I was accustomed to was piano and fiddle. This harkens back to when I was a kid and both my grandfathers had violins and played. I talked about my paternal grandfather, but my mother's father also had one and played and it was from him that I had the Allen's Irish music collection when I was growing up. I would sit and my mom would play back up piano in the living room and we'd play tunes like Soldier’s Joy and Irish Washerwoman, and Paddy Whack and all these cool tunes that were just simple, melodically simple, but pack a lot of energy in them, which excited me as a kid. I was drawn to it like a magnet, you know?

**Rodney Miller**

So anyway, piano and fiddle, sort of the classic New England sound. I tried learning guitar when I was a teenager, and that didn't go that far. I love guitar and I love mandolin. I love all those instruments. I really like having Max Newman as my guitar player in [Stringrays](https://www.stringraysmusic.com/), not mine, but the band’s you know. Max is playing wonderful guitar there, a fellow lefty. I love guitar or piano accordion, and mandolin a lot, that’s sort of my sound, to get that rhythm and lead going. Other leads on instruments, especially mandolin leads, are so exciting. We're playing the melodies but it sounds so different on mandolin. It's a different instrument so different things come out, that sort of drives the whole process.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then bass, what role does bass have in all of this?

**Rodney Miller**

Wow, it drives it something fierce. One of the most effective things when Stuart's playing is that he'll sit out the first time and then come in the second or third time with his bass, and then boom, and everybody's like, whoa, what happened? So good.

**Julie Vallimont**

Stuart has a very rhythmic style. It's just this pulse. very steady pulse. I think it's really well suited for contra dance music, especially. He likes to play with piano players, which is nice, not all bassists do. He could talk about this sometime. if he wants to come on Contra Pulse. I'm not gonna put words in his mouth.

**Rodney Miller**

Well, I have a long connection with Stuart, we go way back.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you remember how you met?

**Rodney Miller**

Yeah, I mean, he was a regular dancer in his teens at the VFW Hall with his trademark shock of red hair, amazing red hair. He came to Pinewoods camp American week when I think Ralph Page was calling, late 70s. He was just picking up the bass, double bass and he had it there. We were talking over lunch or something and I said, hey, look, why don't you sit in on the dance tonight in C Sharp? We're gonna play something in the key of C, I think it might have been Dark Town Strutters Ball, which was one of the (popular) tunes of the day. He agreed and came up and played with us. I think it was the first time he played, you'll have to check with him, first time he played for a dance with a band.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's not a terrible way to get your start. Can we go back in time a little bit to the New England Chestnuts records? They're just such great records. How did you choose what tunes were going to end up on them? I'm just curious about the context that you recorded them in and why did it feel necessary and what inspired you to do it?

**Rodney Miller**

So I think CDSS and Alcazar Productions up in Waterbury, Vermont had the idea that they wanted to have a representation of New England music and to have me and my brother be the mainstays behind it. By nature, it was going to be called New England Chestnuts, so that actually means the dances go with the tune. Petronella goes with the tune Petronella, Hulls Victory goes with the tune Hull's Victory and on down the line. And so in putting it together, because I had also been working with Ralph Page and Bob McQuillen, playing dances with them, I asked Ralph if he would be an advisor to the project. I met with him at his home and then he wrote me a couple of letters afterwards suggesting that we play all these different tunes and they go well with these particular dances, contra dances and so that became the nucleus of the recording repertoire.

**Rodney Miller**

So we did Money Musk, we did Petronella with Green Mountain Petronella, I think, and then on down the line. We did Glise de Sherbrooke and Ralph was the advisor to all that and because McQuillen was busy writing tunes, we included a number of McQuillen tunes. This was pre- any of tunes that I had written yet. One of the inspirations from McQuillen was Chickadee's Polka, what a great polka. We played it all the time. McQuillen's Squeezebox, a tune that Ralph Page wrote, was also a classic tune, and so some of those appeared on the recordings. We played Sarah Dell, which is a polka, a McQuillen Polka, and mixed in with it classic New England hornpipes and reels to round it out. Amelia's Waltz is on there. Probably one of the most famous waltzes besides the Ashokan Farewell, or pre- Ashokan Farewell was Amelia's Waltz.

**Julie Vallimont**

After that you spent all this time playing dances and kind of pursuing your own direction as a fiddler and getting sucked into the exciting world of jazz and trying all sorts of things it sounds like. When you're playing fiddle what do you think of as your role as a dance fiddler? Like when you're on stage playing? What goes through your mind? What are you thinking about? If anything, you don't have to be thinking about anything.

**Rodney Miller**

Well, first and foremost, probably to be a driving force for the dance. So what does that mean actually. It means a strong bow arm, you know, volume. That can be difficult on players. A strong sense of downbeat rhythm, so attacking, on the fiddle because that's my instrument is. When you come to the first note of a measure, you emphasize that note with an extra pressure on the bow stick that brings out a little grit, which reflects, you know, when I was playing in Nelson, the wooden floor of the town hall there. People would come in off the dirt, gravel parking lot. If there had been any rain or whatever, they would have picked up this grit on their shoes and then the whole hall, halfway through through the dance, would be a cloud of dust and the sound on the floor would be the scratching of the grit with their shoes on the wood. I think I was imitating that sound on my fiddle. I was like, dragging my wrist onto the top of the stick and making it go errrkkkkkk a little bit and that was my imitation of the sound of walking down and back as a dance figure and people shuffling their heels on the floor. There was a whole rhythm that was created in the old style dancing.

**Rodney Miller**

Some of the dance halls around the country aren't always nice old 1700s town hall floors. You get tile on concrete and all kinds of hard surfaces on which it's really hard to make noise as you dance. When that happens, you don't quite get the full rounded flavor, the whole environment resounding of moving feet. So there's the strong attack on the playing of the tunes, at least for the melody and then sort of always keeping the beat. Not too slow, not too fast, what's just right; choice of tunes, some are flowy, some are percussive, some are arpeggio driven like the old 1800s hornpipe tunes. Some are a little jazzy sounding, like my tune Contrazz. You get different flavors, which I think is exciting for the musicians, to play different flavors, not always the same. Well, in your experience, what do you think is an important thing to keep in mind if you're playing as a musician for a dance?

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's a good question. I often come to it from the perspective of a rhythm player. I feel like fiddlers and rhythm players often think about the same things but sometimes from different angles. You know, it's tempo and phrasing. But we're doing these things in different ways. I don't know the specifics of bowing. When you talk about trying to play with grit, I remember Mary Cay (Brass) talking about adding a lot of seconds to her chords to give them that really crunchy sound. I think some of that gritty style of playing whether it's in your bowing, or whatever instrument you're playing, is something that makes dance music feel like dance music, right? It's not clean and pretty, it's supposed to have a little...And until you were talking, I didn't realize how much I missed the sound of grit on wood floors. The sound of shuffling feet, like when I'm running sound, we always kind of like, oh, the dancers are so noisy, but it's so great. There's nothing like that sound, like a bunch of human sanders going through taking the finish off the floor with their shoes. It's a very tactile sound. You can imagine the feel of it under your feet and even like the dust in the air, it's all your senses.

**Rodney Miller**

I've experienced you and Noah playing at weekends. I remember one in Phoenix, Arizona, a few years ago, in the fall, I think it was, and you two were so powerful as a twosome, it was unbelievable.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's fun to have a lot of space. You know how much space you have in a band and then you can figure out how to fill it up. I feel like sometimes, the way you set up your bands, they give you a lot of space as a fiddler because you have a really strong rhythm section that's just cruising away. And then you have a [Sam Bartlett](http://www.sambartlett.com/bio.html) type, or a David Surette type that you can trade leads with. Otherwise, it seems like you have a lot of space to just play, improvise, you kind of do whatever you want to. That's how it always looks to me from the floor. I don't know if that's how it feels to you.

**Rodney Miller**

Well, I think you're unveiling some of the secrets of some of the bands I'm in to have Sam Bartlett sitting next to me on mandolin. I'll sit back and let him play a couple times in a row. It's so awesome just to listen and it also gives you a chance for a break you know, you don't have to play hard all the time, sort of self preservation too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely and just a chance for new ideas to flow. Sam has a very creative brain and his brain is different than your creative brain. It's fun to hear the two of you trade back and forth.

**Rodney Miller**

That's what makes the chemistry click, you know, and then you want to do more gigs and then you're a band and then you travel and it all adds up.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's really great. Do you still write tunes now?

**Rodney Miller**

Yeah. So there are 270 [in the book](https://www.rodneymiller.net/tunebook/), and it's just published a few weeks back. After coming close to the end of the whole process of review and editing and going over all the tunes, I realized that I only had 268. I so wanted it to be an even number.

**Julie Vallimont**

Crank out a couple more.

**Rodney Miller**

Two tunes to bump it up to an even 270.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's perfect. Do you have a pile of tunes lying around that didn't make the cut?

**Rodney Miller**

Just a few. The whole process of actually publishing and working on a tune book, it's one thing to create this creative energy for yourself when you're composing, like, get up every morning at 6:00 or 7:00 am and go to the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and sit for a couple hours and see what happens. If you do that regularly, often times the ideas will come, it feeds your artistic capabilities. Other times tunes will show up in the car mentally without paper handy. I had to write the Napkin Tune on a napkin in the glove compartment, after pulling the car over, by numbers. I had to make up a numbering system and figure out well, what actually is the root of this tune I'm thinking of dada dada dada. So mistakenly, I thought that the one root note turned out to be the five note so I had everything a fifth off. I figured it out later that evening when I got back home and named it for what I wrote it out on.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's great. That's a perfect name for it. The Napkin Tune. Thinking back to what you were saying, what we were talking about about like playing for dancers, did you have any classical training or did you start as a fiddler?

**Rodney Miller**

I had some instruction early on. My parents, especially my mom, thought it was crucial to be in a school district back then that had a music or string program. That was unacceptable if it was just a band or no music. When I was seven, I think first grade, I was carrying my grandfather's violin to school and I got excused from a class. I thought was just amazing to go to the auditorium stage and sit with this woman. She had me prop up the instrument, like, hold a viola up there for a seven year old and how to draw the bow across and put the fingers on. It's like, I'm totally into this, so proud, almost like having a varsity jacket.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. It's almost like you had done it in a previous life.

**Rodney Miller**

However you get into it, whether it's through some instruction, like this is how you hold it, which I never really did officially. I created my own style of playing for the dances just to survive all the hours of playing. I developed a way of holding the fiddle under my chin against my neck, propped up with the heel of my left hand where the neck meets the back rib, back plate of the violin and just holding it, sort of propping it in there with my fingers free to move above the fretboard and holding that in position, and then floating with the bow across the strings in a very loose manner.

**Rodney Miller**

I created a method of dipping and diving with my bow pressure. So a little twist of the rotation of the wrist on the right hand would bring my first finger down onto the bow. I developed kind of a tapping rhythm with my first finger. I also rotate my wrist as I’m playing. As you're moving in this complex up and down motion, covering all four strings up and down, there's this rotation of the wrist that is happening too. I can adjust the level of the speed of the rotation to be slow for waltzes. It is sort of blending in and creating a little more volume here and there and then releasing and being softer within even the space of one note. Sort of having altered control of your sound to play in fast tunes and doing a quick little flick of the wrist and an impulse where my first finger is hitting on the stick, kind of like a drum stick on a drum and tapping it. Because the bow here is under tension and you have a screw on the end of the bow to make it tight, then you put your rosin on to create friction. Well here I am tapping away with my rotating hand and re-creating the grit sound of the dirt of the floor by a little more pressure here, but then instantaneously releasing, so it's like errrrrrkkkkk, but then no pressure and then the bow floats on the note. So the energy involved is just really the impulse of the hand twisting and then the bow is set in motion and it floats so there's hardly any energy involved in getting that sound out. When I first started playing for dances, I found playing a two to three hour dance really hard. When I developed my way of playing, I would come away feeling physically okay. I could then play other dances because I didn't feel stressed out doing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that something you could demonstrate on your fiddle do you think, some of these bowing ideas?

**Rodney Miller**

So when I get in position, I've got the fiddle propped into my lower neck, right? The angle, the plane of the fiddle body is not parallel to the floor, like that, but tilted just off maybe by 10 degrees or so.That allows me to enter with my arm and my elbow, the way I raise my elbow or not, the attack of the bow itself on the strings. Now I've developed a position where I can actually move all the fingers on my right hand loosely as I'm drawing the bow across the A string. I could do it with just my thumb and my first finger as a sort of a clamp grip to get enough pressure to make sound. I've often just put my ring finger back on the backside of the frog. That helps me control the lateral movement of the bow. So by having it in that position with my middle finger off the stick and not coming into play, and my pinkie raised up as if I'm politely having a cup of tea and not putting it down. So it's just up a little then (fiddle playing), rotate and hit the bow with my first finger and then I can create all this kind of lively bow stick to hair action. You can see the bow stick vibrate quite a bit when I do it. That sound will come out in the notes. After the note is played, like an A note, the after vibrations on the stick itself create air movement which creates sort of a, what do I want to say, tambour of sound.

**Rodney Miller**

I've had a lot of people say, “I heard a fiddle on the radio, I knew immediately it was you.” You can develop a signature sound by creating sound around a given note. Then it sounds like no, well, not many people are doing that, so must be Rodney. I've always been curious how that relates to classical playing, whether the great maestros that were famous through the ages for their tone and their romantic violin concerto playing were maybe doing the same thing. They were using their right hand as a sort of a paintbrush to tone their color of the sound.

**Julie Vallimont**

Would you be able to play a little bit of a tune showing some of these bowing things, just so that our listeners could hear it in context?

**Rodney Miller**

Well, I'll try ... [fiddle playing]

**Julie Vallimont**

You do this great thing where you kind of slide into your notes like you just kind of sail into them.

**Rodney Miller**

I've been thinking about what it's like to play an instrument like the violin or fiddle and being left handed, so a lot of my coordination really is in my left hand, which is my note hand. Most players are playing right handed with their coordinated hand on the bow. I think personally, it took me probably a couple of decades to get fluent with my right hand, bowing so that I got rid of the stutter that was inherent in being a little awkward with my right hand. I did plow through that eventually, but then the left hand coordination allows me to shmush notes and do things that are so easy to do to change the quality of the note or the attack on a note with the left hand. I think there's a give and take whether you're right or left, you get an advantage one way or the other that you can even out with years and years of playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, honestly, it blows my mind that anyone plays the fiddle or the violin. The fingerboard is so small, and millimeters matter so much for your intonation and everything else. I have a piano, it's five feet wide. It's like no gray areas about pitch so it's just amazing, the little nuances.

**Rodney Miller**

Well, my mom, who is a piano player, tried to give me a couple of lessons on the piano to see if that would take. I said no way, to think of your hand, two hands going in opposite directions at the same time. I was already accustomed to playing the violin. I was like, no, not doing it. But maybe if I had persisted it would have come. I think piano is a difficult instrument.

**Julie Vallimont**

Every brain is different, isn't it? Everyone's suited to different things, that's great.

**Rodney Miller**

So one of the interesting things of being in COVID and putting out a tune book is that I've [created play along tracks](https://rodneymiller.bandcamp.com/music) to go with the tunes. I call them Gems: Volumes. So I have Gems: Volume 1 that comes with the tune book and I give a little code in the front of the book, it's on a little label. That lets you go to Bandcamp and type in the code and then you get 32 or so music tracks at different speeds for 10 tunes that are in the book. Part of the process was setting up the whole home recording studio to be able to do that without going to a music studio somewhere with a mask on and a lot of them are shut down anyway and still are. So it's opened up a whole new door and I am finding like using the microphone that I have here that we're interviewing with, when I record a track, it's so up close and personal that I can hear the hair going across the string as I'm playing a note which I'm getting used to but it's sort of like infinitesimal focus on it. Compared to being in a studio and recording live with the band and there can be four or five people playing along and you have your headphones on but you're also hearing all the sound behind you and you're playing, responding to it, what other people are playing. To me it's like a whole other experience. You don't focus on the close up of your actual playing but rather pouring out music ideas. COVID is a different time and age for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely. Recording at home by yourself in a sterile sound environment, you hear the tone of the fiddle, it's just there and naked, it's just right there. It's a good way to practice for anyone. I'm not a great accordionist, the first time I tried to record accordion it wasn't till I sat in front of a mic that I realized how bad my bellows technique was, you just run out of air at funny times. It's a great way to learn to play any instrument is do it in front of a microphone with headphones on for a while and really listen to the sound. As dance musicians we don't really have to do that because honestly, the finer points of our tone aren't coming across in the dancehall anyway, right? They're covered by the sounds of the dancers and the sound system and the weird echoes off the back of the hall and everything else.

**Rodney Miller**

The caller's calling the whole time.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's not about nuance in that way.

**Rodney Miller**

The really interesting or curious thing for me, is that when I'm doing these home recordings, if I play, I'll do a first take like a track one fiddle, take one, on a particular tune I'm trying to get down. When I play it back, and I created a band backup on Band in the Box to play along to, to me, when I listen back, the solo fiddle is just scary. It stands naked all by itself. I'm not sure that's the way it should sound. So what I've developed is that I'll create another track and record to the previous fiddle track I've just done so I have a sound coming in through my headphone and then I'll do a third track. I've settled on three takes. They're all live, I mean, they're all different. The blend of them creates this kind of chorus effect, which I find really fulfilling. It eliminates all the nakedness of the solo fiddle. I'm tuning in to what I've already played before and the subtle variations that I do throughout, no matter what, it comes out a little different as you would know, right? If you record something on your accordion, three times in a row, they're not going to be the same, right, because you adjusted your bellows air or pushed a little hard on a note and you didn't push hard on the other one.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. A million ways they can be different.

**Rodney Miller**

When they blend together I think it not only sounds better, but it lets you hear nuances from the three different takes within the framework of one. It's kind of fascinating to me.

**Julie Vallimont**

It is, I mean, double, fiddle or quadruple fiddle or many fiddles is also a very classic sound. These tunes sound good with multiple fiddles in general.

**Rodney Miller**

You can imagine you're in a bar or lounge and there's a jam with 5 to 10 players. They're all jamming. It's kind of exciting.

**Julie Vallimont**

So everyone, if you want your own personal session of only Rodney Millers, get this recording.

**Rodney Miller**

The first volume comes with the tune book so you're all set for that. I've already done the second volume, which will be posted very soon, so 10 more tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, that's great. Well, this is a good segue because thinking of sessions and also thinking of ornaments, I wanted to ask you about Irish music and how that came into your playing and what your major tune influences are, like different tune traditions.

**Rodney Miller**

So back in my day, the recordings, like when I went to visit my grandparents, they had old 78s because they were vital in the 1910-1920 era. Some of these were opera or even Irish band 78s. There were Irish tenor records I listened to. Yeah, so where am I headed with this?

**Julie Vallimont**

You've been listening to Irish music for a long time.

**Rodney Miller**

Michael Coleman was a famous Irish fiddler - Michael Gorman, Michael Coleman...these were famous fiddlers on the early phonograph recordings. The companies were open to folk music, if you can believe it. They would record Michael Coleman playing an Irish set of reels. Those became very popular and they also became mass distributed so that other players, either in Ireland or America could listen and learn tunes from a phonograph record. That would influence styles everywhere, right? I not only listened to a lot of that early recording stuff but I also knew musicians in Boston because South Boston is famous for its Irish community. Paddy Cronin..I went to parties at his house and jammed on Irish tunes.

**Rodney Miller**

When I was playing for the Nelson dance in the early 70s, we would go down to Boston and hear about a party being thrown. There'd be two or three of us that would go down and we'd spend time playing with Paddy Cronin, who was a great Irish fiddler from the old country who had moved to Boston. I think he was a paper hanger as a profession. So he was having a career to make money, but so good on the fiddle, an inspiration, very lyrical. You get things in your head, in the same way I listened to early Stephane Grappelli. I think I learned a couple of his tunes note for note just to see what it was going to be like. Some of the inflections or techniques that he was using, sort of stick with you if like them, like, oh, I like that, I like what he did when he slid the bow over three notes at a time and it sounded so smooth and cool. Then you start adapting and adopting things that you've heard. That's sort of what happens, absorbing the Irish music style becomes a part of your playing. It's not that you become an Irish music fiddler, but you incorporate things that you liked.

**Julie Vallimont**

Then you bring those things into whatever you happen to be doing, like playing for contra dances.

**Rodney Miller**

I see it on two levels, like your own personal playing is influenced by your upbringing and what you've listened to whether you listen to a lot of zydeco or hip hop or whatever you're listening to. It's going to stick in your head and if you're a musician, maybe those ideas will come out. I also see those factors influencing your personal style. New England contra dance and its music is a melting pot of different cultures. There's French Canadian, Quebecois. A lot of people came down to work in the mills in Merrimack and Nashua, New Hampshire, back in the 1800s because there was work and pay. They had set up communities there. The Irish in Boston spread out beyond Boston, obviously. So all of these things became sort of a melting pot, also incorporating the Scottish fiddle music from Cape Breton. All those influences came together to create the music that becomes New England, a melting pot of flavors.

**Julie Vallimont**

So all of a sudden that is traditional. It seems like New England tradition includes tunes that are not from New England. That is what traditional New England music sounds like sometimes, like for contra dances and things like that.

**Rodney Miller**

A lot of the current contra dance bands will play old time southern sets, sounds smoother. There's not a lot of finger trilling happening. It's all in the bowing and connecting double strings together. Or then you play some Quebecois tunes, which are very rhythmical in general, very driving and rhythmically more up and down, great for balancing and those kinds of dance figures and then Irish is more fluent and flowing. Connected bowings and finger turns and twists and a lot of minor tunes as well, in their repertoire. Those come into play in the different contra dance dances that are called by callers like Lisa Greenleaf, well known caller in Boston that we've worked with a lot, well renowned for her descriptions to the bands of what kind of tune she wants. She'll turn and say could you play something swoopy for this? Within two minutes, you have to come up with swoop.

**Julie Vallimont**

Whatever that means to you. What are your favorite ways to work with callers? If they give you like a descriptor like that, do you ever want to see the card? Are you just happy to hear a few words of what feel they want and go with it?

**Rodney Miller**

It's been all different kinds of ways. If you're on your game, and you're right in the middle of the melee, it doesn't matter if the caller hands you a dance card and you're just quickly spending three seconds looking at oh, yeah, balance and swing in the A2 and then the B is like, oh yeah, walking around a little blah, blah. Alright, so that fits a category of tunes I think this will go really well with it and two minutes later, there you go, 1 2 3 4, boom, you're playing the tune you selected and it pretty much will fit. I mean, with experience, you know these things. If there's a hey, and a lot of that sort of smooth, non balancey stuff, then maybe you choose a minor Irish set, sort of that smooth, eerie, moody kind of flavor. Just immediately click like, oh, yeah that belongs over there in that category. Oh, yeah, this tune, I love playing that tune and off you go.

**Julie Vallimont**

Of course that's not how Ralph Page did it back then.

**Rodney Miller**

No, well, half the dances were chestnuts, you already knew what the tunes were.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly, and you didn't have to have this repertoire of all these different tunes from different traditions with all these different feels.

**Rodney Miller**

You played the Scottish J.B. Milne for something or Rollstone Mountain as a march, all pretty straightforward, direct.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you enjoy the diversity of tunes that's kind of come hand in hand with the choreography?

**Rodney Miller**

Yes, of course I do, because variety is so interesting and important to keep it vital.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, that's a silly question because obviously, you're one of the people who has added the most to that variety. It's like thinking about variety, you are one of the people adding these things to the contra scene and to our tradition that a lot of us musicians now just kind of take for granted. Like, oh, of course, we play jazzy tunes for contra dances and of course we play swoopy Irish tunes. Even like, for me, when I was learning as a new contra musician, bands with really solid rhythm sections were very inspiring to me. I love playing in a band with Noah, which you mentioned before, where I'm the only person in the rhythm section, but I'm not because Noah's feet like, he and I are both the rhythm section and we're both the melody section at the same time. So in a sense, that band is actually modeled after these bands with rhythm sections, like on the piano, I'm the bass and the rhythm and I'm doing kind of the right hand things that are like what Sam Bartlett would do except not like Sam Bartlett, of course, I would never say that. But trying to quote unquote, trade licks with Noah or harmonize with him so it's kind of, Noah is also the rhythm section. His fiddling is very rhythmic so I think it works because the fundamentals are found in these bands that you've been playing in for a long time. When what you've done is now so wonderfully a part of our tradition. What do you think is next, where would contra music go after this?

**Rodney Miller**

That's a good question. I mean, you see appearing techno contras, that's different, that wasn't something that was done that long ago. What I think will happen is that bands will continue to be popular, if they do their thing and they do it well. I just see it, whatever their influences are, whether they're flute oriented in the melody or fiddle or piano background, or guitar or clarinet or whatever the sound is, if they're good at doing it that will carry forward and people will always appreciate good dance music and dance to it. I will say that if I had continued playing New England chestnut music and stuck to it, I probably would not have had much of a career because everything was changing. Whether I contributed to the change or not, I may have, I think I did. I think that once something is set in motion, you can't just take a snapshot and keep it there for the next 20 years, it just doesn't work. That's my opinion about it. You just have to keep moving forward in whatever people are liking at the moment. In the same way that ballroom dancing became the fashion in the city centers in the middle 1800s, that's the way it went. People still did ballroom dancing because they liked doing it. Then Flappers came and went, then Tango and then, well, whatever keeps it going.

**Julie Vallimont**

Things wax and wane in popularity, all those things have their moments when they're really popular. Contra dancing has been around for a while as you've seen, and we all know, it's had its ups and downs over the years.

**Rodney Miller**

One of the things that really concerns me is the future of contra dance, even contra dance music for young musicians like yourself, in which we're in this period where you don't have gigs to go out and get hired for and travel and sell products, sell CDs that people who have heard your music at the weekend, say, oh, that's so good, I want to take home some of it. So we're not in that situation now. Maybe we'll return to it. But that leaves each individual musician to create something for themselves, either through technology or a presence online. I think it's a harder road to hoe than it was having the actual gigs when I was growing up, you know? Because the gigs drove me.. oh, I have to play Peterborough next Saturday and then I'm doing Cambridge the next weekend. All this stuff lined up and you're so focused, well maybe I ought to learn some new tunes for that and that drives you forward, but then when you don't have that, then you have to create your own force.

**Julie Vallimont**

You have to give yourself a deadline, deadlines, calendar dates, the best way to make yourself do anything. I'm the same way.

**Rodney Miller**

So I feel for what's happening with musicians, because that is my trade really. I'm not going to be able to keep it up forever, and it'll be passed on and it'll be in good hands. You know from what I've heard, there's incredible talent out there. It's a bright future if it continues.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hopefully, it'll just be a couple of years, where we get back into it and things come back. Some of it is just up to what we want to do with our dancing as a community. When you started as a fiddler did you ever think you'd be flying around the country to play at dance weekends all over the place and that that would be your life?

**Rodney Miller**

No, because I was playing pretty locally New Hampshire, Boston, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, through the 70's. Frank Ferrell hired my brother and me to travel out to Port Townsend to play for the international dance weeks. That turned into the American Fiddle Tunes Festival that's still going on, so that meant flying all the way across country. Like whoa, big time. Basically, from then on, it just sort of snowballed into more and more fly gigs to get out and distribute the whole New England thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and you've played music all over the country and all over the world now, playing fiddle tunes.

**Rodney Miller**

I was scheduled to play with with Stringrays at the Shetland Folk Festival this last May and of course that was postponed as all the other gigs were.

**Julie Vallimont**

You've been playing regularly in England for years. You must have been looking forward to that, what a bummer.

**Rodney Miller**

Yes, but the way things are going, the gigs which have been cancelled this year have been rescheduled for 2022 and 2023. Hopefully, it'll all come back.

**Julie Vallimont**

We sit tight and keep ourselves playing in the meantime and folks at home, you have some new tunes you can learn.

**Rodney Miller**

So one of the coolest things about playing in England so much, which i,s a little bit ironic, I think, because when the dancing came over, the French contra dance masters took it to England, it was popular in the courts and country, and then fell out of favor, but kept up in the colonies when the British brought it here. And now it's very popular back in England, sort of come around to, I think. One of the amazing things is that my grandmother, Elvira Widrig Miller, had done family research and determined that one of my relatives was born and raised in Nether Stowey, England in Somerset, which, unbeknownst to me, was five miles from Halsey Manor, which is the now English Heritage Dance Center, where I have played quite a few times. I remember being driven to get to that gig at Halsey Manor, passing by a small town that was named Nether Stowey, home to my ancestor, who went to America, Deer Island, Rhode Island, in the middle 1600s. I was like whoa. So, on the last trip out, I was with Max and Stuart, and Robbie Thomas was driving us. We stopped at Nether Stowey and went into the tavern there and raised a beer, a pint to Hugh Parsons.

**Julie Vallimont**

What a cool story. Talking about coming full circle, it's really neat. Well, thank you. This has all been so great. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about in this interview?

**Rodney Miller**

No, I just hope everybody stays safe. We're going through a really difficult time right now, people passing away from the virus. So, let's just hope the best for everybody.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I agree. I'm hoping, it's like with any life experience, even if it's bad, at least we find ways to make positive things out of it somehow, or at least have like a shared expression. I wonder if like, tunes will be written during this. This will become something that we talk about in our dance history and the future of like, oh, this is what happened during the time when nobody could dance. And these are the tunes that were written or the dances that were written. Some people are writing dances for one and two people, forget triplets, dances for like, COVID isolation pods. And, you know, I wonder if a tune, like Ashokan Farewell, which has so many memories that Jay was feeling about Ashokan, what about tunes that we write when we want to dance and we can't?

**Rodney Miller**

Well, I wrote one of those to make 270. The last tune I wrote was "All one and all alone", sort of a lamentation about my experience.

**Julie Vallimont**

Imagine the joy we will feel when it can happen again and we hear those feet on the dance floor one more time.

**Rodney Miller**

Dust in the air, dust in your fiddle and dust in your lungs.

**Julie Vallimont**

Your fiddle's probably never been cleaner.

**Rodney Miller**

Still dirty. I keep the dust on it as a memory.

**Julie Vallimont**

Good. Well, thank you so much. It's been so wonderful to talk with you. I really appreciate your time. Thank you.

**Rodney Miller**

Thanks for having me, Julie. I appreciate it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Take care. We'll be back to it someday.

**Rodney Miller**

Okay, I hope so. Alright, bye.

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