Contra Pulse Episode 25 - Jeremiah McLane

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. Today we speak with accordionist, pianist, and composer Jeremiah McLane.

Jeremiah was raised in a family with deep ties to both its Scottish heritage and its New Hampshire roots. Traditional New England music and dance were a part of his parents and grandparents generations. After an early formation in classical piano, Jeremiah spent his teenage years playing blues and jazz. Following undergraduate studies with jazz legend Gary Peacock, he studied Indonesian Gamelan, West African drumming, and the music of minimalist composers Steve Reich and Philip Glass. It wasn’t until his mid twenties that Jeremiah began to immerse himself in the world of traditional Celtic and French music, studying accordion with Jimmy Keene and Frederic Paris. He then spent several decades traveling in Europe, doing field research that laid the groundwork for a Master’s degree he received many years later from the New England Conservatory.

In the early 1990s Jeremiah formed two bands: The Clayfoot Strutters and Nightingale. Both bands had strong traditional New England roots and had a deep and lasting impact on the traditional dance scene in New England. Jeremiah has recorded over a dozen CDs with Nightingale, the Clayfoot Strutters, Bob & the Trubadors, Le Bon Vent, and Ruthie Dornfeld. His recordings have received numerous awards, and he has composed music for theatre and film, and has received multiple grants for the creation of new work.

In 2005 Jeremiah started the Floating Bridge Music School, which is devoted to teaching traditional music from the British Isles, Northern Europe, and North America. An adjunct instructor at the State University of New York in Plattsburgh, NY, he also teaches at the Summit School of Traditional Music in Montpelier, VT, at the Upper Valley Music Center in Lebanon NH, and at many summer music camps including Ashokan Fiddle & Dance, Augusta Heritage Arts Center, American Festival of Fiddle Tunes, Maine Fiddle Camp, and more.

In our interview over zoom, we talk about Jeremiah’s family roots, his early background in jazz and various styles of world music before discovering Celtic music. He tells the story of encountering Dudley Laufman as a child which inspired him as a contradance musician. We also talked about his tune writing, and composition process, and he shares a lot of stories from his groundbreaking bands over the years, and what it means to innovate while drawing from tradition, but not being held back by it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello, Jeremiah McLane, and welcome to Contra Pulse. Before we started recording, I was just telling Jeremiah, how excited I am to talk with him. I left him speechless.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yeah, that's right.

**Julie Vallimont**

Best intro ever. Well, hi. It's so good to see you.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I know. I know. It's been a long time. We've known each other a long time.

**Julie Vallimont**

You were one of the people who was one of my inspirations, still is, always. Let's start from the beginning because the cool thing about this is that I've worked closely with you in some ways. And then in other ways there are all these stories that I don't know and I'm excited to hear and questions I don't know the answers to. How does it all begin? Take us back to the very beginning. How did you end up playing accordion and how did you end up playing accordion and piano for contra dances specifically?

**Jeremiah McLane**

I think it does go back to [Dudley Laufman](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/dudley-laufman/) who you've had on this on this particular show. And I know you know, every time he comes to our class and [Maine Fiddle Camp](https://www.mainefiddlecamp.org/) he'll do this little routine where he goes, "Now Jeremiah, your grandmother..." and he starts talking about my grandmother who hired him when I think he was still a teenager to play for the McLane family Thanksgiving party in Manchester, New Hampshire. Dudley became a fixture because my grandmother really was into the whole Scottish tradition and her kids, that included my dad, I'm not sure her kids were that into it, but boy was she gung ho and she was a woman to make things happen. She got Dudley to come and he played contra dances, he sang songs. And so my early memories of that event was a ton of McLane's running around in kilts and Dudley playing the accordion. He played piano accordion back then, calling dances and man was he dashing. I can't remember, I was probably six or seven and I had a wicked crush on Dudley. He was funny, he was the center of attention and he told great stories. And so the music really got into me that way. I took a detour of many, many years studying other kinds of music, particularly jazz, jazz piano. I think my contra dance music probably owes as much to Les McCann and Memphis Slim and Otis Spann as it does to Bob McQuillen. I listened a lot to Bob and Dudley and the whole New England dance scene growing up. But I was studying music that had much more in common with blues and jazz, that's what I was really into. I can tell you, there was a certain time in my life when jazz just felt empty, and no longer something I wanted to do. It was 1978. I was in Seattle. I was in school, trying to get bands and get gigs and jazz was just really incredibly competitive and not particularly warm and fuzzy. It was a really male dominated world, that's for sure. It was very, how good are you? And increasingly, that just felt, not what I wanted. I ended up living on an island in the San Juan chain, a place called Lopez, which you've probably been to, there's a big music scene out there. It was a great place for music when I lived there. Tons of musicians there, all of us working like crazy in the summer doing carpentry and things and then all winter long we were just playing music. So there was a band that was formed and I just feel like the first time I sat down at the piano to play for contra dance, I had literally never done it before, and it was the most simplest thing I could do. I remember they were playing a tune that Bob used to play a lot, Spring Song, [sings a fiddle tune]. I just remembered playing the chords and they were like, oh my god, they're triads, it was the first time I played a triad in like 20 years. It was both freeing because the harmonic sequence was obvious to me in my ears. I knew what the chords should be. I didn't have to play flat nines, sharp nines or altered chords. I wasn't worrying about voicings, I was just playing rhythmically. And that was the beginning. So that was 19 or 20, living on an island. We toured all over the Pacific Northwest, all over Vancouver Island playing for contra dances. At that point there wasn't a whole lot of precedent out there. So it wasn't like living in Boston and playing at that time, when there was Yankee Ingenuity. We were free of any sense that we had to follow a traditional model so we just played and I just played, nobody ever taught me anything. At least you know, how to play contra dance piano. I also was playing the accordion at that time. And for me that the person who had a huge influence on me in the accordion world was Laurie Andres who at that time was living in Baltimore, Maryland, but he later moved to Seattle. I saw him and was just absolutely captivated by his contra dance playing. I grew up contra dancing, also, I should say as a as a teenager, a lot. I remember hearing a lot of great bands and Laurie was something special. He had this unbelievable phrasing, made the accordion really pop. At that time I was also starting to play Irish music and I realized well Laurie was really following the footsteps of a lot of piano accordion players, which is imitating the sound of a button box. I'm not sure if he would say that about his playing, but it was really super, super rhythmic. The [Rod](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-24-rodney-miller/) and [Randy Miller](https://www.fiddlecasebooks.com/) and Laurie Andres recordings were really big. The Miller brothers.

**Julie Vallimont**

The New England Chestnuts.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I think Laurie added so much to that band. I'm just kind of rambling, Julie but chronologically, this is all in my early 20s. Living where I did, Port Townsend was literally you could row to Port Townsend from Lopez, if you felt like it. And Port Townsend, that was the beginning of Centrum and they had Dougie MacPhee come from Cape Breton to teach piano and I spent a lot of time listening to Dougie and taking his classes. He was amazing, he was an amazing teacher. But I never really wanted to be, I was so clearly like, I'm not going to become a Cape Breton piano player, I'm not going to become....... it was at that point in my life, I'd already decided I'm not going to be something else that somebody else is. But I love his rhythm and the way he played. I guess I'm gonna say I kind of moved after a number of years, I moved back to New England, I grew up in New Hampshire, and I came back and finished some kind of schooling. Whenever I was in, I started playing. I met [Pete Sutherland](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-19-pete-sutherland-part-1/) and we started the group together called the Clayfoot Strutters, which is technically still a group, as much as anybody can be a group nowadays, but that's probably the longest musical relationship I've been in because it started in the 80s. I also started playing with [Becky Tracy and Keith Murphy](https://blackislemusic.com/), right around then sort of early 90s. We had a group called Nightingale, which I imagine people have heard of, I know people have heard of, obviously, that's a stupid thing to say. In fact, I will often hear bands, and maybe it's the wrong thing to think when you hear other people play, but I actually hear what they were hearing in Nightingale, I can hear the influence. It's possible that they just listened to some of the same things that we were listening to and that has nothing to do with Nightingale. I just would say that it would be foolish of me to pretend that that wasn't a big influence for people. I play now with Eric and Ryan, [Eric McDonald](https://www.ericmcdonaldmusic.com/) and [Ryan McKasson](http://www.ryanmckasson.com/), and we've got a trio called [Kalos](https://kalosband.com/). So that's something that's still active today, even during the pandemic, we're mixing tracks and preparing to release them. I think they both talked about what Nightingale meant for them. And for us at the time, Nightingale was just really searching for rhythmic ideas and different sounds. I think being a dance band wasn't the end idea that we had, it was more like just making great music. And if people are dancing, it's so exciting, but the idea was always it was listenable. I think that's a big, that's a big thing, we were always thinking about harmonic melodic ideas, and not just dance music, because you can dance to a fairly basic piece of music. We were always trying to layer it with tons of ideas that would stand up to listening over and over and over again. Nightingale was a big part of our lives, we traveled a lot and we did dances and concerts. The Strutters were never traveling like Nightingale was and we sort of lived on the road for a number of years, it felt like anyway. I think there's a band that I should mention, kind of just answering your one question with all the information that you might want, you can stop anytime and jump in. Because obviously, you said how did I get started? Well, that was a while back. So I'm just being forward. But anyway, I just want to say there's a band that I played with for a number of years that I thought was kind of different, but it never got captured in an audio or video format. It was called Big Table. It was with [Judy Hyman](https://www.judyhyman.com/) and her husband Jeff Claus, June Drucker.

**Julie Vallimont**

From [the Horse Flies](http://www.thehorseflies.com).

**Jeremiah McLane**

From the Horse Flies, that's right, June Drucker played bass originally, actually [Colin McCaffrey](http://www.colinmccaffrey.com/) was playing bass and then June Drucker and [Larry Unger](https://www.larryunger.net/) was playing guitar. The reason I mention it is because A. most people have never heard of it and it was an idea band. It was this idea of bringing the north and the south together to the extent that the Horse Flies were conceived of as a southern oriented band, southern repertoire. I sort of was thinking, well, what if you took northern, an accordion and Larry, Larry plays both genres. But anyway, it was the genre mix match, you could say it was a mashup kind of a thing, and yet it worked really well for dancing. The Strutters do a lot of the same thing. And I guess I still feel like the old time scene had a huge influence on me early on. It's been a while since I felt more part of it. But there's something about the groove in the music that was really helpful for northern bands. I know that many contra dance players from New England have mentioned that, the southern groove in Appalachian music is really great for dancing. So Big Table, Nightingale, Clayfoot Strutters, but the first band that I got started with before all that was [Fresh Fish](https://www.gordonpeerymusic.com/fresh-fish) and that was with Kerry Elkin. Do you remember Kerry?

**Julie Vallimont**

I saw him a little bit in his last couple years.

**Jeremiah McLane**

He lived down near the cape. He was one of the people that really took Irish music to a level of play for contra dancing and made it work. He was committed to playing Irish music for dancing and he wanted to find tunes and ways of playing that made sense for him, it made sense for me too, I really understood that idea. That's kind of what Dudley was big into at the time when I met Dudley. Now he's really into different stuff. But Dudley was very into Irish tunes and bringing Celtic music to New England to play for contra dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you know what inspired Dudley to do that? Was that a trend that he was following?

**Jeremiah McLane**

Actually, it's a great question. How did Dudley get into it? All I know is that Dudley was, at the time when he was young, the popular music for New England contra dancing, you wouldn't have necessarily said it was Celtic. It was tunes, sure, but you wouldn't have said Irish tunes were going to be the source. I think Dudley was just really influenced, certainly the [Boys of the Lough](http://boysofthelough.info/) had a big influence on on him, I think. Because the Boys of the Lough were mixing genres. They were mixing Quebecois and Shetland and Irish and English and Scottish. I don't really know the answer to that question. I just know that when I met Kerry, and Kerry said, basically, I want to play Irish tunes for contra dancing, and I want it to be awesome. It's possible to play Irish music for contra dancing, maybe, and not have it work very well. But Kerry was into making it driving. [David Surette](http://www.burkesurette.com/david) was in that band, Danny Noveck, [Gordon Peery](https://www.gordonpeerymusic.com/). So that's kind of actually how I got started in the day to day business of playing for contra dances, through Kerry. Keith also played and then gradually Nightingale. So you know, now, it seems so long ago. I mean, it was long ago. I mean, it was in the 80s that I was playing with Kerry. So that's a long time ago.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Ask me a question, otherwise, I'll just keep rambling on and that's not very interesting.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, I'm loving this. I'll let you talk as long as you want to talk. But sure. Going back a little bit do you remember the folks that you were in your very first band with? Are they names that any of us would know if they'd gone on to play dances?

**Jeremiah McLane**

The very first band when I was living out west on Lopez? It's very possible if I said some of the names. The saddest story that I can tell you is there was a wonderful fiddler, Donald Stiff who passed away. That was after I left to come back to New England. But Donald was was killed, and this is terrible. It's just I want to say that it was a very tragic kind of association with the band because Donald was a really key part of that band. He was the fiddler and he was very charismatic. There was a flute player, a piano player, Mark Minkler, who's still out there playing music. People would know Mark, I think, if you asked folks out in the Pacific Northwest, he played trumpet as well, flugelhorn. Mark was a great multi instrumentalist. The caller actually was Aimee, I'm trying to think of her last name, there was a caller in the band. There were several members alternating, David Zeller was one, we called him Z, played guitar. I mean that goes back that's late 70s. I'm just trying to think, there's a kind of a gap in here when I left the Pacific Northwest and came back to New England. I remember I met David Surette at UNH in '84 let's say so David and I have known each other for a while and David, a very active member in a lot of dance bands, particularly Fresh Fish. David and I played together in Fresh Fish. We also played together for a time in Airdance. I was never on any recordings with Kerry actually in Fresh Fish , it just turned out he would record and I wasn't there. And likewise, Rodney's done so many things. Rodney Miller's done a million projects. I've never recorded with Rodney but that early band, there is no recordings of us. This is before anybody was documenting hardly anything. So I don't believe there's photographs of us from that era.

**Julie Vallimont**

I wish.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Well, it would have been a lot of hair. Genevieve was the fiddle player so we had two fiddles. I'm just going to describe this first band. We have two fiddles, guitar. I played piano accordion, Mark played everything and we had a caller. We played the Pacific Northwest, all kinds of places. I do remember going out to the west coast of Vancouver Island, places that are still, if you go there today, there's a contra dance scene out here because it's really remote. Back then it wasn't that different and we played some dances out there. You asked me for memorable stories. We were always taking ferries to various places. We had this huge hulking vehicle that was a terrible battery and I swear we pushed that thing off the ferry more times than I can think of and how they put up with that and, being young and stupid we were just going to the next thing. The Clayfoot Strutters reminds me of that band occasionally. The Strutters, that's a garage band of people that just never really wanted to quit, we just always enjoyed hanging out together and the driving, the traveling was a big part of that, the hang was great. The thing about the Strutters was the idea was take the melody and take melody apart and play, and now, it seems so funny to say it but at the time, everybody played every single note of every tune, like Kerry. Kerry played all these tunes superfast, like our tempos were 120, minimum, a lot of times he was at 128, playing Irish music. And every single note was played, every role was there. And the Strutters, after that experience of like, oh my god, playing it slower tempo and also sometimes playing the tunes halftime and then not even play all the notes was kind of liberating, a lot more space. It helped to have drums and bass to fill the space out. I think what I discovered is that you can play slower in certain places, certainly not in the Midwest, thank you very much. That didn't go over so well. You know, because if people are used to old time tunes played really fast, they get used to that tempo, you can't come along and play super slow. But in some places, like California, the Strutters would play really slowly and it seemed like it worked. I also know that it didn't work for certain people, like we played the Downeast Dance Festival in Maine a long, long time ago. I remember the Strutters played, there was this palatable sense in the room that it was very divided, there are people who were absolutely loving it, we can hear them so that was good, that was gratifying. And then there's a lot of people just with their arms folded, they were not happy. They didn't like what we were doing and they didn't see why we should be given a platform to do it on. That's what I felt like. And now, does anybody feel that way? Is there anything you can do that's frowned upon? I mean, I guess there is.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think there's still some people who don't like various aspects of the contra scene. There's not much scandalous anymore. It's like going to an ice cream shop and deciding what flavor you like, people can argue about that till the end of time. But it's not like anyone saying, pistachio? What is that doing here?

**Jeremiah McLane**

There's arguments about what makes good dance music. I believe you can reasonably have differing opinions, but certainly good rhythmic sense. I will say that that's been a key thing for me, thinking rhythmically, that musicians who have a rhythmic orientation to the world, and believe me that comes up if you go to the conservatory environment where there are classical musicians and you try to play with them from this other world, it can be, oh, they have a very good sense of rhythm. It's just different. It's very different. I would never fault the experiences I had when I went back to school in Boston at [New England Conservatory](https://necmusic.edu/), excellent. Players of excellent caliber with excellent time, no question. But it just seemed like, in the beginning, when I started there, my time, which I thought was pretty good having spent all these years playing for dancing, I'm like, oh, it's different than theirs. The interesting thing for me was the experience that they didn't grasp that there was more than one way to play time. They were like, well, you're wrong. You're just, your time is is off. And I'm like, I don't think so. But it sure is different than what you're doing. So that I had to figure out how to basically make that adjustment. And to the extent that I could, and I'm not saying I always did, but when I could make that adjustment, then I sort of rightfully felt righteous, you know, righteously felt righteous. I felt like, oh, I can do it that way, too. But the truth is, it's just rhythm. That's what makes great dance music. If it's bad, sloppy rhythm or poorly executed rhythm that can't be good dance music. I don't really know how you could argue it's good dance music if the rhythms aren't really, there. What you do, but the choice of tunes and I think it's all like you said, it's like ice cream.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, it's interesting at NEC were you having those experiences more with classical players or jazz players?

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yeah, although I suppose you could have that with jazz players. You could have that experience with a jazz player who yeah, would maybe.......

**Julie Vallimont**

They both treat time differently, they have different ways of thinking about it.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Exactly, but that's changing now. I think what's so amazing is how much it's changed since I was there. Now you get [Eden MacAdam Somer](https://necmusic.edu/faculty/eden-macadam-somer), she's helping run that program with [Hankus](https://necmusic.edu/faculty/hankus-netsky) [Netsky] that is the CI [Contemporary Improvisation] program. [Jacqueline Schwab](http://www.jacquelineschwab.com/bio.html) went through that program. Those of you who know English...I think the training, so many contra dance musicians have gone through that school, either there or at Berklee.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Anna [Patton], Lissa [Schneckenburger]...lots of folks.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I think it just had a different environment, maybe right when I was there was starting to change because Lissa and Corey [DiMario] were there. Corey was in a different program. I think the respect that we have today for dance musicians is a good thing, that people recognize, it takes a lot of work to be good at anything. The harder you work, the farther you can rise. And why should we draw lines and say, this kind of work is more valuable than that kind of work, that doesn't made any sense. Truthfully, players today, they have to be able to do everything, because that's what they do. Everybody seems to be able to do everything and play by ear, read music, play rhythmically, play actually, without rhythm and doing it well, because that's an incredible challenge too.

**Jeremiah McLane**

One of the weirdest contra dance gigs, I have done some weird, odd contra dance gigs. One of the more weird ones was, I have a quartet that, I play with a quartet that isn't so active now but it was the brainchild of James Falzone, clarinetist who was at NEC. He wanted to play his own music and his interpretation of world music. So there was an oud player, Ronnie Malley, who was also based in Chicago and a hand percussionist, Tim Mulvaney and I and we'd been playing more jazz festivals, or ethnic music, exotic kind of, we had the oud and we were playing non traditional non Western type music. And then we get this gig in Champaign-Urbana. It was one of these sort of lecture gigs where we would talk about the music that we were making and perform it, but at the same time they were having a contra dance festival, or folk festival. And they asked us if we would play for this contra dancing, because I think they knew that I came from that world. James said, sure, we'll do that. And then it was like the day of that contra dance, we sort of did this crash course. I was realizing that these guys, they just hadn't ever thought about what it was or what it would involve and it was so interesting. I mean they thought about it, it's not like that. But the sound that we were getting was so different partly because of the instrumentation, I guess. And partly because the way we'd been approached playing was very free, it was a lot of free improv that we did.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think there's a certain skill in playing for contra dances that's easy to take for granted. It's not always apparent, it looks like you could just go sit up on stage and play music and people will dance to it. And there have been times when like bands are in Quebec, wonderful, amazing bands who I love have come down and at various festivals. They say, oh, can you play for contra dance? They'll say yeah, sure, but unless you have someone in the band who has that experience, somehow the feel isn't, it's like the groove, the rhythm, the tempo, the phrasing, all these subtle things that make all the world of difference. I'm just saying a Quebec band, hypothetical Quebec band as an example. I've seen lots of folks do it, all kinds of bands end up in like a contra dance slot and they're like, oh, just play for some dancing, just play tunes, and it'll be fine.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Right. I'll name some names. A whole week in Augusta, [Augusta Heritage Arts](https://augustaartsandculture.org/) in Elkins, West Virginia, which has a great music and dance program and Lisa Greenleaf was the caller. This is a while ago, this was back when Réjean and André Brunet were there, very young. They really hadn't been discovered, they weren't known by anybody but Lisa knew who they were. She's like, well, you guys can play for the contra dances. Well, it was a week of just Lisa, literally, you can hear Lisa shrieking, A1, or alternatively B1. Occasionally she just say, NO!!!! because these guys didn't play a 32 bar tune the entire week. Keith and Becky and I were there, we sort of alternatively took times occasionally sitting in with them, and it was just really kind of exciting, because, dancers don't really need 32 bars, that's a myth. Lisa dealt with it, she figured out how to call to their music, but they just didn't play anything that worked. It was funny, because they were completely aghast, like, what do you mean? You know, they were like, we're playing dance music, this is perfect. And Lisa was like.... I mean, it is funny that way, just the different worlds that collide and it's kind of fun. I mean, it's kind of interesting.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's wonderful to see what happens when you collide these worlds, right? There was a time I think, at the Flurry when there was a band from Quebec, and the caller said, do you play Money Musk and they said, oh, sure. So they launched into Money Musk, it did not have the right number of bars and of course, the dancers were all very flustered. Those things are kind of charming, maybe not in the main hall at the Flurry.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I'm never gonna take it for granted, though. It's too much work to play that many notes to take it for granted. When you get up on stage, and you're going to play tunes, if you're gonna play the melodies, you got to kind of play them. They go by fast.

**Julie Vallimont**

Contra dance musicians work hard, like three hours of straight playing.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Who is it that said, you can play good, or you can play fast, but you can't play both. I mean, talking to a group of beginners, the thing that kills me because contra dance music is seen as a great entry for beginning musicians, like community musicians. If you haven't played a lot, you can be part of the band, you can play for contra dancing, it's a great way to be involved in music. But it's crazy to think of an accordionist, a violinist or any instrumentalist is going to play these tunes that they don't really know very well at these breakneck tempos, if they've only been playing their instrument for a few months, or a year. It seems to me this idea that contra dance music is so wonderfully accessible to all, I would argue that actually, no, it's the classically trained musicians who decide, oh, I'll try something different. And they'll start getting into Celtic music, they can do it. But if you haven't been practicing scales all your life, it's really hard to get up and play at that tempo and play well, with expression, it's really hard.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and pay attention to the caller and the dancers and deal with sound that's usually not ideal and lots of different variables at once.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I have another story for you, if your listeners like, that's, it's escaped me, it might come back. I was just thinking of all the weird things that you witness in playing for dancing and what people have been, what people do. I saw, in Kenya, a contra dance that I'll never forget. I mean, I don't know what it was actually. It was, obviously we were tourists in Kenya. It was clearly set up for tourists so with that in mind. But it was two lines, men and women. They were doing definitely right elbow, left elbow around. I saw do-si-do, several do-si-dos. Kenya, you know, it was British ruled till quite recently, until the 60s anyway. And no doubt a bit of British dancing made its way into their culture. Well, it turns out, they had an accordion, this guy was playing an accordion and he was playing it in a way that was very rhythmic, it made sense. It wasn't a melody, it certainly sounded more like what you would traditionally hear in South Africa or perhaps because the accordion is pretty popular in several African countries accordion is like a big deal. Whatever it was they were playing it looked like a contra dance and it felt rhythmic and oh, wow, that's so great. But they might have just been putting it on for the tourists like oh, this will be something that people can relate to, but it was fun to hear.

**Julie Vallimont**

Were they playing New England kind of tunes?

**Jeremiah McLane**

Oh no, there was no tune it, there was no melody. He was just playing the accordion rhythmically.

**Julie Vallimont**

I see what you're saying. I misunderstood. And there was a caller?

**Jeremiah McLane**

There was no caller. They were doing prescribed figures, this is like 1985. I lost a lot of the recollection. But this image was striking because they were dressed up in Maori [Maasai] outfits, doing something that clearly was... It was just this weird, visual thing. But there was no melody. I know what I was gonna say, I played for an entire weekend and I don't think we played a single tune. I remember it because it was the first time I'd ever played with [Sam Bartlett](https://www.sambartlett.com/index.html) and [Sam Amidon](http://www.samamidon.com/). And the organizers, I'm sure they thought they were getting this great band, like, oh yeah. And we started and we hadn't taken the time to prepare. So the first night of the dance the weekend started and we were like, literally, I think literally, the caller said, are you guys ready? And we said, sure. And then they taught the dance, and we hadn't thought what we would play. And obviously not having played together, we didn't have any repertoire in common. So somebody started. I think what happened was Sam started playing something and I didn't know it. And after about one A part he kind of was like, okay, well, why don't you play something and then I started to play something. It just kind of turned out instead of playing tunes, we just launched into this free for all of eighth notes or whatever 16th notes. I guess Sam was playing banjo, or guitar...Sam Bartlett. And we just never managed to get a tune going. You know how that happens sometimes? It was fine, it was rhythmic and people were dancing. We were playing. And then after we got through that first dance, we were like, that was awesome. The whole weekend went like that. We never planned ahead. Occasionally it was bad. But often it was quite alarmingly good considering that we weren't playing a tune. You know what I mean?

**Julie Vallimont**

So you played like riffs and chord progressions, and things like that.

**Jeremiah McLane**

There was a lot of notes. I remembered all the notes, but there was nothing that would coalesce and they had to fall into phrases so that people could keep the phrasing, although we got off the dance a number of times. But what was liberating was this idea that all you have to play is something that's rhythmic, that goes da-gah-da-gah...something that moves people. I'm sure it was nothing great.

**Julie Vallimont**

At it's very least. Also, all of you had played so many hours of contra dances before that, you've internalized the tunes and the phrasing of the tunes, the phrasing for the dances.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I don't mean to hold it up as some kind of beacon of great taste or success. We had measurably good fun doing it and laughter, which is no small part of what's great about dance music is the ability to make people laugh and have a good time.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Absolutely.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I'd hate to be too poetic or something. I think there's a lot of focus on being really good at being a contra dance band. I mean, literally, how many workshops have you done, Julie, where the organizers want you to do a workshop in teaching the local musicians how to be a really good dance musician.

**Julie Vallimont**

 I've done them.

**Jeremiah McLane**

How to make the dancers go, whoo, that was a great topic. I remember that one. How to make the dancers go, whoo. Well, you could ask them to go whoo, that would that would work. If they're nice they'll go whoo. The idea of being a good dance musician is partly that you're there to have fun and help people have a good time and not lose track of that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think this is a fun juxtaposition. Because I think of you as someone who's totally down for a good time and a chill hang. And then also, you've been in one of the most precise dance bands of all time, like when people talk about perfection in a dance band they talk about Nightingale and kind of how perfect everything is a lot of the time and there's different personalities and musical aesthetics and playing styles that lead to that. It's fun that you've had the gamut of and even like playing with Kerry he's fairly exacting and wanting to do it well. So it's fun that you've had this gamut of things, what is your mindset when you were playing contra dances with Nightingale? What was your mindset in that?

**Jeremiah McLane**

I know what you mean, looking at us, you might not have said we were having the greatest time of our lives. I mean, we we're all very serious about what we're doing. But I think they're not mutually exclusive.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then just to be clear, I wasn't trying to imply that, there's an amazing feeling when you're playing good music.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yes, it's safe to say that with Becky, Keith and I, we were tuned to the finest detail that we could get. And if we practiced every day, we would feel it at night. And then if we went home and didn't see each other for a couple of weeks, and then we're back out on the road the first night would be like, oh, man, this is not working. This is different. And gradually that evening would get better and the next night, and then by the third night, we'd be like, oh, yeah, we're back to our normal groove. And truthfully, that was a band that was after having played together for a decade. I mean, in other words, I think, really great rhythmic playing, you don't do it right away, you build up to it, you can maintain it if you do it every day with a band, but who plays with a band every day, unless you're on tour, right? I have to say this, Nightingale, if we weren't driving, or eating, or sleeping, we were practicing, we didn't do a whole lot else. That that does pay off. Like if you work hard you get.... we were so clear on what we were trying to do. I mean, there was clarity from the get go, we're going to be the best dance dance band that we can be. I mean, it didn't have to do with being the best there is because we had no thought of that. It was just like, given that we're doing this, we're gonna give it our all. Well, it turns out that those three individuals, we all had a high level of ability and commitment, and willingness to work. I think sometimes you get some of those things, but they don't always line up all at the same time for everybody. You get bands that are really great but people want different things, or you get bands, everybody wants the same thing, but they don't quite have the abilities because they're too undeveloped or people are different, developed really differently. We didn't set out this way but we had the bases covered really well with three people and that's why trios are great. I've heard you play, Julie, with Noah and you covered, as a duo, every single base there was to be covered. A duo can do it for sure. But a trio, the brilliant thing about the trio is that, because with two people I think you can cover a contra dance. You have your melody and you have your accompaniment.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's some people who say you don't need more than that.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Well, the fun thing, for me, and I'll say this often was me, it wouldn't have had to be me, but it was my role often to be that other thing. It allowed me to use my improvisational background and whatever, I could improvise parts. I often wasn't playing the melody and I often wasn't playing just a backup, I was playing something else that it would kind of skate in between. Also that's true about the accordion, the accordion can be really chordal, it can be melodic, which is the right instrument for that role. I famously once, I think said to Elixir, who needs a horn section when you have an accordion or some brilliant thing like that. Of course they all laughed, like, right. An accordion can do that kind of horn like sound in such a way that instead of coordinating three individuals, what are we going to do, your fingers all do the same thing. So I think with Becky playing the melody, Becky was committed to the melody. You know, through and through she just felt that that's my thing. Keith, being the rhythm machine that he is on whatever instrument he's playing, the feet, the guitar, the piano, the mandolin, it just kind of worked. There's bands that have used some of those ideas, but it's not unique to Nightingale, the idea is that you're satisfying the rhythmic part of the dance, the need for melody that people seem to have despite proving that it's not necessary, that one weekend with Sam and Sam, but still, I think people like melody and yeah, give them a good tune. I mean, and then the color, the color that I think if you just have two people, the colors are just a little more limited. When you have three people there's something magic about a trio, you gotta admit, there's that alchemy that happens. Of course, it can happen with a quartet, etc, etc. I'm so used to the trio format, I'm playing in two trios now. A trio is an amazing combination of things. I don't have as much experience in quartets or duos, well in duos I do, but in quartets, I do not. Well that's not true, I have some experience. But when you get up to the larger numbers, like the Clayfoot Strutters then the challenge is how little can you play and still contribute.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, because you have to carve out a space for yourself, but also leave room for everybody else at the same time.

**Jeremiah McLane**

That's a different challenge. Very different.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's also an underrated skill, it is a skill to be able to pick a little tiny pocket and carve it out for yourself and not get it anybody else's way.

**Jeremiah McLane**

 Especially if you're a piano player, I mean, you've got 10 fingers.

**Julie Vallimont**

You can play all over the place.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I used to think I should get paid not to use all my fingers. I would play chords, I would play like, whatever, not all 10 fingers but I would be using five notes on my right hand and then a couple in my left hand or what have you, like seven or eight notes. And people would say, could you play just fewer notes? I always felt like, well, you're gonna have to pay me if you want me to play less. Because at that time, I thought well, more is better. One handed piano playing, do you ever do that?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, it's kind of like in jazz where the left hand of the piano is replaced by the bass and you just end up playing a lot differently, you know? So then you can do two hands, block chords and things where they're essentially playing the same idea. You know, but playing less is hard. I think it's harder to play less than it is to play more for sure, I really enjoy the challenge.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I had this terrible bicycle accident about three years ago. I don't know if I told you about this. I think I might have because it came up, it did come up when we were teaching together.

**Julie Vallimont**

We talked about it at fiddle camp.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I'll never quite, this third finger doesn't bend. I watch videos of myself. When I play it's so odd because it's this board, this thing that sticks out. Because it doesn't bend, if I bend the other finger, I can't bend the other fingers because then I can't use them so I play now flat fingered.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that's on your right hand for those of you who aren't watching this, your right hand.

**Jeremiah McLane**

It's crazy. So what I do now, I'll take any opportunity to play less because playing lots of notes is trickier now. I do remember, there were times when I didn't think about what my fingers were doing and I could just let myself go and that's a wonderful feeling to get lost and have no consciousness of the effort or the energy required because you really are, it's like you are a keyboard. I remember there are people who play like that. I remember hearing Karen Tweed when she was quite a bit younger. She'd been playing, I think literally, like she'd just come back from Willie Clancy or something. She'd been playing probably 10 hours a day minimum for seven days. I just think when you're playing that much, it's just the fingers, you don't even really, there's no effort. They just kind of play the tunes and that's a great feeling. But that's a lot of notes and to play less you have to think.

**Julie Vallimont**

I miss that conduit, there's times in my playing, especially when I've been playing a lot where I hear a sound in my head and it comes out of my hands and I don't have to think about how to make it come out.

**Jeremiah McLane**

That's a nice feeling.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you play an instrument long enough, and you know it well enough. I didn't say I played it well enough, you don't have to be technically good. I'm not saying that I'm technically good. But I played it long enough, like since I was a kid, that there was a direct conduit between my brain and the keys. I didn't have to stop and think what and I could audiate in my head what I wanted to hear and then immediately do it. That skill came in very handy for contra dances, because as an accompanist, I can sense what's going on, and kind of immediately respond to it. And Noah's always like, how did you know what I was gonna do before I did. I think some of my most transcendent moments on stage are when we're all like that as a band, where you know what your bandmates are going to do, just like you know, your instrument. And when that's all in place, then we can connect with the dancers. Those are my favorite moments, is when the whole hall is in sync, and the dancers are moving with the music and no one is thinking about it, you can tell the dancers aren't in their heads either. It's just all that perfect creative place.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Now you got me thinking about, I'm suddenly remembering early days of dances where like the dances I went to as a kid, they would play a tune and they probably put a medley but they were just play it and the dance would be over and then everything would stop and then everything would just be kind of done. And then you do another dance, and they'd play another tune. After a series of dances, there was no sense that any one dance was any different than any other dance, the last tune, the tune before the break, exactly the same as the first dance. The first tune after the break exactly the same. They were all the same. I don't think any of the, this is in the 70s, this is like people were into playing tunes that they'd learned. There was great attention to tune that repertoire. But nobody was thinking about the dance as an evening event that had a beginning, a middle and an end that had a shape that could possibly have any significance. I think the moment musicians started to look at the dance itself, the entire evening is having an arc, it changed everything. And I'll tell you, I don't think Dudley was doing that. I mean, honestly, I think Wild Asparagus probably started doing that early on.

**Julie Vallimont**

When Nightingale started were you.....

**Jeremiah McLane**

Oh, that was the first thing we did. I think the first thing we did was be like, well, what if we just play tunes for a dance? I mean, it took a while. I don't mean we did it immediately. One of the things that struck me, but especially Lisa Greenleaf was really interesting as a caller, she would study a band's repertoire. And so unlike some callers of the time, who would say, well, I really like Road to Boston for this one or whatever tune, they would say the tune that they wanted. And you'd be like, but you don't know how we play that tune. Lisa would know our version of a specific tune. And she'd say, well, I want something that sounds like the way you play Road to Boston or whatever. So Lisa took the time to study the band and it depended on who the band was because she knew all these bands. But with Nightingale she was like, I want this. I want that set that you do. I want it here in this spot. And you know, sometimes we would argue with her. No, no, we're gonna save that. But I mean, the truth is Lisa had an amazing sense, as any good caller does, about what the evening needed. The weird thing about contra dancing if you think about it, Julie, if you're in a Cajun band, you have to think about that because there's no caller you've got to plan the evening. And you got to know when to put the waltzes where the waltzes belong, everything has to be done by the band. Well contra dance bands initially didn't do that. They just played what the callers told them to play and the callers weren't that good then they just got whatever the hell the band felt like playing. Lisa knew enough to to find out what the band played a particular way. So it's really interesting, this moment, and I don't know what the date was, but it was early in, I'm gonna say 90s when Lisa was saying, well, the thing that you do on that tune I want, I don't care if you play that tune, but it has to be that feeling had a lot to do with the groove and the rhythmic focus. It wasn't the melody and I still to this day, callers who would ask for a particular melody, it's like saying, well, what color are you going to paint your house? Well, I'm going to use Sherwin Williams paint, you know, like man, but what color? The tune doesn't really matter, it's how you play it. And now, this is a thing that I think people understand. But when I was starting, it took a while to figure it out, well what is a good way to end the first half of the dance. A lot of times, I remember this one tune that we did a lot of, Return to Camden Town. It was a one tune dance. I mean it was played by itself, you didn't medley with anything. And that was really important. There was a time, I think it was Kerry that every dance medley had to have three tunes. And it was like a two-tune dance medley? I don't think so. But like a one tune, no f\*\*\*ing way, excuse my French, no way. I think part of the thing about having a one tune dance is it's different. It's a different quality and again, Return to Camden Town, which is an Irish tune with lots of notes. We just had such a different mood, a different take on it and it was very slow, the intro was super slow. I'm just thinking of all the ways in which things changed between playing in the 80s, to the 90s, that was the biggest shift. That was so still so long ago, but I think those days of, oh, we're not going to just play a series of tunes medleyed together because they sound good together, we're going to play in number three spot this because four or five and six, we know that we want this.

**Julie Vallimont**

In the night, like, third dance of the night.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Then pretty soon, by the time you start looking at the dances there's really only one or possibly two moments that don't matter that much that you can do anything. Everything else is like spoken for kind of like oh, well, that's that and that's that. Then the great thing was like the most wonderful weekends that Becky and Keith and I would play was we'd show up with Lisa and Lisa would say, well, here's your program, and it would be all the things that we like to play. And I said, well, there's one new one that we have, she's like, sure, that's great, we'll just plug it in here. It was the opposite of having to deal with a caller who would be like, well, I want this tune and then you have to negotiate, well, what do you really want? Let's look at the dance. You know the callers that give you the card. Like that's even worse for me, I don't want to look at the card. You know, truthfully, I've never been the one to do that. Having the caller know your repertoire well enough, that is just such a gift. I imagine a band like Wild Asparagus or maybe that has a caller that's built into the band, well that's what you get, you get that kind of, I mean, that's a success. That's why it works. I don't know why more bands don't do it.

**Julie Vallimont**

There are some bands that like, thrive on being completely improvisatory and every night is a totally wild experience, you never know what's going to happen til you get there. And then I think there are bands like Nightingale where it's like being able to have all the diversity of your sounds and your arrangements and be able to craft an arc for the evening is where you get to this really transcendent place. I think the callers who will learn the band's repertoire and think about the band and, you know, Lisa mentioned that she would just kind of plan her dances around your music. I think if you want that really transcendent experience, that's the way to do it with with a band like that.

**Jeremiah McLane**

We were so lucky. I can't tell you how lucky we were to have someone like Lisa be willing to do that. Cause she didn't have to do that and it was helpful. But you know, you made a great point, there's another way to play for contra dancing, which is, as you say, every night, reinvent the wheel be and be spontaneous and that's intense.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, that's like, I would love to talk to people like Eden and Larry, for example, does Eden think about, well, we have to play this set fourth. I just feel like everything she plays is magic, no matter what it is, or what happens. You've played a fair bit with Notorious as well.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Every time I play with them, it's kind of like, whoa, because I don't do that often and I have to say, there are times playing with Mark, the bassist. I'm spacing on Mark's last name.

**Julie Vallimont**

Mark Murphy?

**Jeremiah McLane**

Mark, I owe you one. I'm gonna make it up to you, I swear to God, Mark, I'll make it up somehow. But when Mark is there, it's kind of like this unbelievable thing where, talk about covering all the bases. It's so unbelievable.

**Julie Vallimont**

Pun intended.

**Jeremiah McLane**

It's just incredible to play with them. There's a lot that's up for grabs. Instead of having these little moments worked out, I'm laughing at myself, because that is true, I spent a lot of years doing that and then it's so refreshing to be in a situation where it's like anybody would laugh if you tried to do that, like, the third time through, we're gonna do this chord and Larry be like, whatever, sure, cause that's not how they, that's not the point. The point is to be in the moment, and play great dance music. So yeah, that's the other thing. I guess you can't, I think, be good at both. I don't think you can really, really be fantastic at both of those approaches. I haven't seen a band that does that equally well, it's hard. Because you kind of have to commit to it, it's almost like a religion. You're either one or the other I think I mean, I don't know. What do you think? Do you think that's true? You've got to choose?

**Julie Vallimont**

I think it's like having a major and a minor. I think you have to major in one of those. Because how you plan your repertoire and how you plan your rehearsals. If you're a band that's going to improv all the time you'd have a very different repertoire than a band that's crafting an arc for an evening. The way you rehearse would be very different. So I think at some point, it is a little bit of a different animal.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I mean, playing with the quartet that I was talking about [Allos Musica](http://allosmusica.org/projects/#/allosmusicaensemble) that played that one contra dance, but that is a band that was born from this idea it's going to be improv. And so the setlist is improvised. And if you're reading music, you better know where the thing is because it's not in any kind of order, and you improvise throughout. Even if there's a sheet of music in front of you, you're improvising. I have to say, for somebody who actually went to school and has a master's in improvisation, I've always loved to take myself down a few pegs, I can't improvise my way out of a paper bag sometimes. So they give you this degree, this is your master, so I guess you're a master. But what does that even really mean? It depends, you have to practice it every day. I don't know, I don't improvise every day. I don't play the accordion every day.

**Julie Vallimont**

Improvisation is totally context dependent, you're not going to go into some free improv in the middle of a contra dance. What improvisation means there is very different. Maybe you are, are you going to do that?

**Jeremiah McLane**

As I said, except for that one weekend that I did, and they never asked us back so maybe it didn't go that well. But it was fun. No, I think you're right Julie.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sam [Amidon] does amazing things, like Sam can take a vocal solo and a fiddle solo at the same time and have two completely separate melodic ideas happening simultaneously. That's like another planet of improvisation.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yes, you're right. You don't improvise that same way. It certainly takes work and so you said a major and a minor. I can't quite figure out which one, I think I was happier having a structure actually. I like having the structure.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Writing a good tune is a really fun experience, which is sort of taking the art of improvisation and then kind of like a freeze frame like oh, okay, so this moment of improvisation, now it's a tune and I'm going to do it this way over and over and over again. A true improviser might not be satisfied with that, they'd be like, no, I want to keep on experimenting. But it can make tune writing difficult sometimes, because it's hard to finish the darn thing because you keep changing it. You ever do that with a tune?

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, sure. I can't make up my mind about something. But let's not talk about me writing tunes. Let's talk about you writing tunes because you've written a lot of tunes that have become like part of our collection of tunes that everybody plays. For Contra Pulse listeners, at Maine Fiddle Camp every year, [Lissa Schneckenburger](https://lissafiddle.com/) instigates and we have "Jere-aoke." She and I will go and find people to join us and we'll play Jeremiah McLane tunes for hours. And sometimes you're like, happy to not be there.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Oh no, actually, I mean, everybody wants that, come on.

**Julie Vallimont**

it's the best.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Or it could be "Julie-aoke," "Lissa-aoke..." Everybody who writes tunes wants secretly, their tunes to be played by everybody. There's no question about that, in my mind. It might not be the motivation for writing it. But you know, nobody wants to be a composer in obscurity. And yet, I'll be honest, I often write tunes and I think these just aren't going to be great tunes for everybody else. You know, I can tell they're not. And then the weird thing is, you never know which ones are going to work for people, are going to speak to people. I mean, sometimes, you know, but I think it's really fun when people play a thing that you've written and they do it differently. They cover it, and they do something different with it that you didn't think of. That's cool. That's like, I always tend to think, everything that every tune that goes out I've tried it basically every other possible way under the sun that it could possibly ever be played. Because I just have to do that otherwise I feel like well, it's going out and I didn't even explore. But it has happened to me so obviously, I don't do that. And what's the tune I'm thinking of? Maybe Honey in the Woodpile.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Yeah, there's a few.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yeah, that one. It's somehow when I hear it played by other people. I'm like, oh, that that is so cool. But that's not how I imagined it would come out but I like that I actually prefer that, whatever, it's fantastic. So it was different than how it came out on my end. But that's cool. I mean, that's a great thing to have happen. Yeah, wish that would happen more.

**Julie Vallimont**

Then it enters the folk process. It gets folk processed.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I wish that would happen been more, but what can you do? You can pay people to play your tunes. Actually, I'll be honest, it really helps if you're writing with awareness for stringed instruments. You know, like being a pianist and an accordionist, it can just lead you to forget, oh, there's people that are crossing strings and have, I think, you know, fiddle is a dominant instrument in this world, we have to acknowledge that. If you're writing tunes that sound horrible, or just are simply horrible to play on the violin, it's kind of like, what's the point? You know, why would you do that? You're writing for an instrument.

**Julie Vallimont**

How did you learn? How did you learn to write tunes that were good on the violin?

**Jeremiah McLane**

I didn't.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, that's why it's so nice. I love playing your tunes, because they're written by an accordion player, piano player for once.

**Jeremiah McLane**

It's true that accordion has its own thing. I will say that I wrote a tune, I remember, I think it was called Jehovah's Retreat without really thinking about it at all. And somebody said, several people, guitar players said, oh this is great on the guitar. And I'm like, it is? Because it because that fooled me, I wouldn't have guessed that. I mean, to be honest, if you're writing tunes that are good, and they're not ridiculous, they should be fine on the violin, you know? I'll be honest, the one thing that I don't do well is hear the sound of the violin, when I'll write in F, I'll write often in F because I love F. Has great sonority. And then because I like relative minor, I ended up in D minor and then a lot of times D minor. Again, depending on what your contour is like of the melody it actually might be better in G minor on the fiddle, or something like D minor... So I don't always know what it's gonna sound like on the violin. I'm not trained well enough to play something and hear it on an instrument that's other than what I'm playing. I mean, I think it's a great skill to have. I know people that can do that. So I have to go to send it to somebody. Could you play this?

**Julie Vallimont**

Get it fiddle tested. I do that with my tunes.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yeah, get it fiddle tested.

**Julie Vallimont**

I have them like smooth out the squirrely parts or say the parts that would make a lot more sense. I think some of your most beloved tunes have a certain lyricism in them that makes them really great contra dance tunes. I mean, you can sing them. That's why "Jerry-aoke" is so fun.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Oh, is that true, you can sing them?

**Julie Vallimont**

I think of tunes of yours, like Time Will End or Regain or Honey in the Woodpile, or you know, I didn't make a list of my favorite Jeremiah tunes before this interview. So I'm definitely underprepared. But there are a lot of them that are very lyrical and I enjoy that for dances or even tunes that you didn't write but had brought into the dance world like the hymn that Winter Snow was from. It's very lyrical. I mean, it's a hymn. I think those things make great dance tunes because they're clearly phrased, they get stuck in everyone's head and there's a way to connect with the heart, as opposed to the mind. You know? And that's a really lovely thing.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Well, that's, that's nice. Thank you for saying that. I think you're right, taking a hymn, an English hymn and turning it into like, basically a Morris tune, there's something kind of obvious about that. Because for all we know, John Goss, the composer of the melody, See Amid the Winter Snow, I mean, who knows, maybe he heard it played by a dance band somewhere. I mean, I don't know. It doesn't strike me that it's impossible that could happen, that he might have borrowed that melody from a dance source. But I don't know that anybody was playing thinking of hymns as being repertoire that Morris players could use. But why not? And hymns are a great source of material for melodies. I think writing melodies is tricky. Because, I don't know if you feel this way Julie, maybe you do because you write a lot of tunes. There's a sense that if you're in a diatonic situation, that is, if you're playing a melody that's singable, more or less, it's not overly chromatic, because it's hard to sing. If you're a contra dance musician, in this world, chromatic passages are fine up to a point, but a fully chromatic piece of music, it's tricky. I will say that if you're not doing that, so if you're playing diatonic music, the chord, the problem becomes the limited sort of palette you have for harmony. I have a neighbor, who is a composer, he's a famous composer actually, Stuart Smith. In the avant garde world of percussion composition, he's number one. He's written some of the most respected music written for drums and percussive instruments. But anyway, he was just saying, he can't listen to Beethoven or Mozart, he just can't listen to classical music. Because for him, everything is just, you hear one note and you know where it's gonna go. There's no sense of, everything is so inevitable. I don't feel like that, I would never say that. But when I'm writing music, I often get into this thing of like, oh, here we are again. I've got this small, tiny set of chords. And you can sprinkle them, and you can try to do things differently but after a while, it's hard to be original. It's hard to feel original, it's not hard to be original. It's hard to feel like and so I would say the best way for me to write is go into an altered state. I mean, if I did drugs, that's what I would do, but I don't, is to get out of body and mind that's familiar and be in this other place. And then presumably, you just let things come through you and if it comes out sounding like Time Will End, fine. I mean, Time Will End is just like, very, it's predictable. It goes to all the places you expect, but it's lyrical. And something about it speaks to people. But after having written for every Time Will End, there's a lot of other pieces out there that didn't make the final cut, so there's a lot of pieces that I've gone through, and I'm just like, well, how do I write something that stands out? Now, we could talk about what's a standout thing that strikes, that's different, that grabs you. I have some favorite composers that I listen to a lot that I really like, that always make me, I mean, there's a great number of young composers that I think are phenomenal that I like to hear. I'm talking about the contra dance world, sticking in this world. But sometimes a tune really writes itself and that's such a great feeling. And these days, what have I written since the pandemic, I've had some I've had some time to write. But I don't often write jigs, I usually write things that are in five, four or three, four reels. Sometimes I feel like that's not my preferred place to be writing tunes for contra dancing. I actually always end up, though, religiously making an eight bar form, doubling it. I mean, I always find like, that's such a great format.

**Julie Vallimont**

You could say a lot in that format, sometimes it can feel limiting, but there's a lot that can be said, within that small framework. It's like a haiku.

**Jeremiah McLane**

It's absolutely like that. You're right, you're totally right. I mean, every once in awhile something like really doesn't want to go there. And then you're like, okay. I have tunes that that I wrote and resisted, resisted and then I finally said, oh, screw it. And then I changed them and then made them, I mean, Honey in the Woodpile was like that was one of those tunes like, alright, I'll put it...

**Julie Vallimont**

We could get way off topic here. But I've always wondered how you wrote the turnaround at the end of Honey in the Woodpile, and where that came from?

**Jeremiah McLane**

Well, I will say that it's the one part of it that's not that singable but it's really just a bunch of perfect fifths. I mean, it shouldn't be that hard to sing but it is hard to sing. It's hard, when I teach that tune nobody gets that. That's the one measure that throws people. The intervals are large and large intervals are harder to hear than smaller.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's something about it, it's not intuitive in the way that you expect. Once you learn it, it's intuitive and so that's a fun twist.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yeah, it's a derivative tune, though. It's incredibly derivative of other things. I think I write a lot of really derivative stuff. I really feel like if people like to know if it's interesting, like, there's this moment in the Flying Tent, which is a tune that Keith wrote actually, that Nightingale recorded, but the beginning bit is a piano bit, which isn't a good introduction.

**Julie Vallimont**

A piano riff?

**Jeremiah McLane**

A piano riff. I've had several people actually write and say, can I get the sheet music for that? Because these are people who can notate anything. They're like, I've notated your entire album and then they send me the files of all that. He said, but I can't get the very beginning of the Flying Tent, could you please and I was thinking well, because it came from a recording or I should say, it didn't exactly come from a recording but I was at NEC in the very beginning. And the beautiful thing about being in graduate school is that you spend two years. It's kind of like you're on vacation from everything else. That is if you're lucky enough to not have to work full time while you're going there. I remember sitting in a room with all these recordings. And Hankus said, here, listen to this, listen to this, listen to this. And so this Greek recording of this incredible clarinet player, playing with an electric guitar and a percussionist. They were just playing this piece, and the guitar was doing this thing, which is like, what is he doing? I listened to it about a million times. I went to the piano and sounds like, kinda like, and then years later, or not years later, but at some point, we were playing the Flying Tent and this idea, and it's a little bit connected to when I was younger, I used to listen to [Professor Longhair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professor_Longhair). Do you know who that is?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes. I love, like Dr. John, all these New Orleans piano players.

**Jeremiah McLane**

The rhumba boogie, what Professor Longhair's thing was this sort of weird Caribbean influenced blues. Anyway, there was something about that, combined with this Greek, crazy, great guitar player, electric guitarist, they came up with this thing that's very hands interlocking. So it would be hard to notate because there's so many repeated E's in a row. It's like the two thumbs are just hitting a lot of E's. There's just the inflection, the rhythmic inflection that I got from this recording. Okay, so that's just one little story, but it's nice to share things like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, I remember the first time I took a lesson with you. I was afraid of you in that way you are of people when you really like what they do and you look up to them and you're a little afraid in that sense. Not that you were a scary person but I was all bashful. I remember going to your house for the lesson. I think that you were, in your true form, you're like, well, what should we do? I was like, I don't know. How about you show me the riff to Flying Tent. I think I told you I'd been playing along. That was the first thing we did together because I had been playing along with all your albums and figuring out all the parts by ear. And that was the one thing I could not figure out, I put it in the Amazing Slow Downer at 50%. I could not figure it out. I spent days. And so you broke it down to me and I videotaped it. I went home and practiced it until I could play it.

**Jeremiah McLane**

That was very nice of me. Well, but actually, I'm joking.

**Julie Vallimont**

Any listeners, if you send me $20, I'll send you a copy of this video.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Julie, my question I'm really curious to note. Doesn't that count as learning though, if it's something so specific that you want, and you get it and you figure it out? It's a real question, I want to know, do you feel like, was it useful? Did it serve you in some way?

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely. Because my goal...I never played it for a contra dance. That wasn't the point. The point is just to get your brain and your hands thinking in different ways. When you hear something and catches your ear as being, I just feel like I've never heard anybody do that for a contra dance before, especially on the piano. I wanted to figure out what it was that made it different and try to understand it. It was also like when I asked you about montunos, because I think you guys [Nightingale] played Golden Wedding Reel. And you used to do this [sings Latin riff]. I just kind of remember asking you, I'd heard that and recognized that as a feature of a different kind of music and asking how you pulled it into contra dance. And then you showed me how you would play the thumb on your right hand as that leading syncopated part. And then the trick with that on the left hand is that the bass note precedes the one beat. Like it's a syncopated bass note and it comes before beat one when you put your hands together. I remember asking you how you did that for contra dances and how you made it phrased. I think you implied that well, somebody else does the phrasing like something else is holding down the phrasing there whether it's the feet or the fiddle or something...

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yes, I did say that because I'd had some bad experiences with it. It worked when we did it in Nightingale, but we practiced it and everything that modified to work for a contra dance. I remember thinking, oh, well, this is this great thing, now I can do this. And then I would go somewhere else and play with somebody else and almost inevitably people would hear the rhythm and they would be like, wait, that's not right. They would adjust but in the wrong way, and then I would have to keep adjusting back to get them and pretty soon it would like fall apart. So there was a tension in that idea that didn't work for everybody, especially didn't work if they'd never heard it before. You can't just lay it onto something, you have to practice it with people so they know what to expect. Becky had to know, almost to sort of tune it out a little bit and play to the dancers, play to the feet, basically, because the feet were keeping it all together. That's a kind of an error or a thing that I'm not overly proud of that only because it became, it's very easy for it to become like a cliche or something. I didn't develop it a whole hell of a lot, we would do it on certain tunes, and certain tunes seemed made for it. And certain tunes were like, so resistant as to be like, wow, it doesn't work on this tune, doesn't sound good. I would love to spend a lot more time than I have in my life to figuring out what makes a particular tune really rewarding to add that kind of Afro Cuban rhythm. Because I can't quite figure out, tunes like Golden Wedding, not the same as, say some other tune, but they both, like it's hard to even generalize, but it certainly seemed intuitive, like, oh, it's gonna fit here and I would try it, it was like, great.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think tunes where the chords come in like chunks and they tend to bounce back and forth between like the one and the seven or something where they're kind of staying in one place for a while work really well for that.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yes, it doesn't work if there's a specific chord progression that you have to play. It's nice if it's just like one or two chords that you can go back and forth. I mean, Wizards Walk would not be a good contender. It's funny you should mention that because that was a thing for a long time that I just fell in love with and now I won't do it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because you did it.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Well, actually, because it doesn't work with, because if I'm playing in a pickup situation, or it just generally doesn't really work. It works with the Strutters. But then the Strutters so many things are happening that it's not even the main event. It's like this little thing that the piano's doing.

**Julie Vallimont**

But well, that's the thing. There is such a big rhythm section going on there.

**Jeremiah McLane**

It doesn't really matter. But it's also true that just to be clear, like it's so divorced from its roots as Afro Cuban piano style, that it's kind of almost, it's more contra dance piano than it is Afro Cuban piano, if you know what I mean. It has more in common, because there's so much of it has to fit the tune and the groove of the music. So now I hesitate, I'm embarrassed to say it's not really an Afro Cuban idea, but it came from spending time listening to Afro-Cuban music and loving some of the piano playing from that culture.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think it's funny, I think there's two ways to define oneself as a contra pianist, and one is I play traditional contra accompaniment à la Bob McQuillen, or any other lovely number of boom chuckers. And the other one is to say, I don't know, maybe the other way to be a traditional contra piano player is to say, I take all these different influences, and I see what fits because that seems to be what a lot of us do. That's very common, whether it's pulling from Afro Cuban things, or playing with like mbira music and those rhythms of two against three or whatever you're doing. French tunes, we haven't even talked about Brittany and central France and all the French music you played.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Because we'll start crying if you do that. I'll start crying...

**Julie Vallimont**

I miss all of that for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's crossover between all these things. It's interesting, at one point, you talked about the word derivative, and if the tunes you write are derivative or not. And I would ask, what's the difference between derivative and traditional?

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yes, very good question. Derivative, or traditional? I think it's a great question. But I know I won't have a good answer. Because I get into these twisted mental states when people ask or talk about traditional versus the opposite, what's the opposite of traditional? You know, non-traditional.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's the question, right?

**Jeremiah McLane**

I'm an intellectual person, actually. And a person who likes to talk, but oh, my God, I feel as if, it's the same feeling I get when people argue about in science, whether nature is more important than nurture, I guess they don't do that anymore. It's the same thing. So derivative, I don't mean to accuse you of asking a bad question, because it's not that. What I mean is when I said derivative about Honey in the Woodpile, I was thinking about one specific thing. I guess there's a moment when it sounds like Barrett's Privateers to me, and every time I play the frickin' tune, I literally think oh, yeah, that's the part that sounds like Barrett's Privateers. I can't help it. It just my ear, and I knew that when I was writing it, and I almost said, oh, come on, don't do that. It's exactly like Barrett's Privateers. But then I left it in. So it's derivative in the sense that I knew when I was writing that it sounded like Barrett's Privateers. And if anybody doesn't know what I'm talking about go listen to Barrett's Privateers and tell me if it doesn't sound a little bit the same, right? I mean, it does, Julie.

**Julie Vallimont**

But your intention in writing, It's just a little moment and your intention of writing it was not to cover Barrett's Privateers. There's these patterns that come up in traditional music, and they get in our heads, and sometimes they come out in other places. It's probably more a case of that.

**Jeremiah McLane**

But then to answer your question, derivative and traditional are the same. But what might be different is that the implication that traditional is somehow upstanding and honorable because we're carrying on a tradition. Where somehow derivative feels a little pejorative, I guess. But a derivative thing is something that you derive from something else. I have to say that Steeleye Span was, everything I write sometimes is derivative from that band. The more I think, actually English music is what I really resonate with. I have this memory of, I used to play in a band called Gypsy Reel, we didn't talk about that band. That's not a contra dance band. It was a band that toured in England a couple times, I remember in the 80s, and one time we were in the north of England and I went to a jam session in a pub. And you know, you've been to pubs before and tried to play in sessions. It's usually like this incredibly difficult experience especially if you're traveling and you're a foreigner, you don't know anybody. But you also don't know any of the repertoire. It's all very specific to that particular locale. I went to this club and I thought, well, I won't be able to play. And they started playing, and I knew every single melody in this weird way I can't explain it was like, oh, my God, I've heard this before, but of course I hadn't heard it before. It was all English folk tunes but everything sounded familiar. And that's because in a prior life, in 12th century England, I was a blacksmith in this little village in, no, I'm just making that up. I derive a lot from English music it turns out. I didn't know that early on. But when I wrote Honey in the Woodpile, I think it's derivative of something. I love English music. like crazy, but, you know, I'll never be an Andy Cutting or I'll never be somebody that plays English music but I just like it. I think New England music is akin to it. Growing up listening to Dudley play when I was a little kid, I think a lot of what Dudley played was sort of English-y.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like if you listen to like Mistwold or something like that.

**Jeremiah McLane**

The funny thing is that all these melodies, I think England should be included in the Celtic cultures, I have to say it's kind of this crazy idea that England is not Celtic. Whoever came up with the idea that Celtic cultures were Scotland, Ireland, Brittany, Galicia, but not England. Like, are you kidding me? To exclude England from that is insane. I don't even know if people do but I feel very much like England, Ireland, Scotland, it's very much of a of a similar aesthetic, a feeling.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. And then there's like the Isle of Man or Wales, where's Wales in this?

**Jeremiah McLane**

I think being a musician is just, it's tiring to be to be overly...I think, here's my response to that question of tradition versus not tradition. It's a little exhausting to be asked to comment on what you're doing while you're in the middle of it. Because it takes so much focus to really find yourself as a human being, and make music and commit to making music day after day, that is real. Like that's not a bunch of crap, you want to either write or play music that's real, that has some value. That in itself is a huge endeavor. I don't think anybody should underestimate what it takes, you gotta really focus on it. It's hard work. And I don't mean the doing of it, I mean, the attitude that you just stay focused on it, and listen and pay attention whether you're a contra dance player or a violinist in a classical orchestra, or whatever music you're playing, you really got to work it, and then to have to comment on whether it's traditional or not. Something about it just kills me. Like why can't we let somebody else worry about that?

**Julie Vallimont**

 Absolutely.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Maybe I feel like I'm have a chip on my shoulder right now. I sort of feel like I'm just not gonna let myself hold back anymore about this. I've been around a lot of discussions about this. And it just feels so wrong to make it into a controversy or to make it into a disagreement or a cause for concern. It doesn't f\*\*\*ing matter. You have to find something in yourself that allows you to play music, and then you have to find the people that will respond to it and that's what you should be doing if you're a musician. I just think justification and God forbid, trying to discredit somebody else for something that they're doing, it just seems so horrible. Okay, I'm done. I'm off my soapbox now. No idea where that came from. Obviously, it's pent up. It's things I probably should have been saying all along. I just, I feel like you and I, we're the same Julie, we're trying to make music. There are so many barriers to the act of it. The simple act of making music is difficult. Then there's the making a living from music, which is unbelievably challenging, and navigating the business end of it and staying true to what you believe you want to do in music. And God forbid you should have success, that would be the worst thing possible, because then you'd have fans to worry about right? And of course we don't want to have that problem. But if you really have a following, and you have to please them, oh my god, like to be a popular musician what would that be like? So all these things are just, and then somebody comes along and wants to engage about tradition, and sometimes I feel like they want to set you a trap or something. And maybe they don't but maybe people just like to talk about it. I really don't give a damn, I don't know what I am and I don't know what you are. All I know is, I've heard you play and I've been moved by the things that you do and that's enough. I just remember one moment, watching you play with Noah and it was just something that was so satisfying, and repetitive and yet exciting because it was like, okay, when is it going to change? Or how is it going to change? I know it's going to change, but where's it gonna go? And that excitement of not knowing, it's what makes people I mean, it's part of what makes music so fascinating is that it can go so many places. Amazingly enough, it actually hews to the same pathways over and over again, isn't that incredible, like contra dance music, it's incredibly repetitive. But it still has this quality of like, oh, it's compelling.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those things you just said about hearing me and Noah those are the exact feelings I had listening to Nightingale. I would go dance to you and it would be like the first tune you're like, okay, they're killing time with this tune and then something's gonna happen, we all know something's gonna happen. We're just all gonna wait, the whole hall knew it, and then bam, whether it's Flying Tent, or whatever else you're up to. It's like just the right amount of unknown, if it's too much unknown everything falls apart. It's kind of like being in on the surprise, but not knowing what the surprise is. Thinking about crafting an evening, I don't know if I consciously got that from Nightingale, bands like Perpetual Emotion and Nightingale and Wild Asparagus who are doing that kind of thing or maybe I was drawn to your music because it's an aesthetic I already liked, like when you were talking about that earlier. Maybe people are inspired by other people because they have a similar aesthetic and they want to learn from each other. Or maybe they want to directly copy something that someone else is doing and folk process it into their own thing. When you mentioned that Dudley would play one tune sets because he often talks about that, like, why do you need medleys for anything? And then how Kerry would want to play like a three tune medley and then in Nightingale you're like, we're just gonna have a one tune set and in Clayfoot Strutters you don't even maybe have a tune or something. It almost feels scandalous but isn't that just traditional all over again, in a different context? You know you didn't say we're gonna bring back Dudley's tradition of only playing one tune for one dance. You weren't probably thinking about it in that context.

**Jeremiah McLane**

No, but actually, to be fair, the effect of playing the one tune that Dudley would play, it was entirely different than the effect that you would get today, like so I think you'd have to say that what was different is the mood. Dudley really wasn't really setting a mood. He just had the one tune to play. What Becky, Keith and I were doing was saying, if we change tunes, it's actually going to prevent us from doing what we want to do. I don't think Dudley was thinking that way. I mean, it's really hard for me to say what Dudley was thinking. I don't think Dudley can say what he was thinking. It was over half a century ago that he was doing this stuff. I don't know that he would quite capture that young man playing the thing that he was doing. I wish I could have asked him back then. Because I think now you might not even get the answers from him, I always thought he was trying to do something really different. That he was trying to, he was sort of copying the Boys of the Lough, or something, like this cool idea of kind of a European sensibility to New England contra dance music. But I don't know that, I'm just sort of making it up. Actually I have this story that I've told people over the years, but actually I don't even know if it's true. It's kind of like the story that I want to believe that Dudley is the one who should be credited for bringing Celtic music back to contra dancing. I don't know if any of that is true. I just think that there was an era if you listen, I remember talking to Red??? Tolman, the Tolman family, well, Harvey Tolman was a famous contra dance player. I'm talking about the generation before Dudley. There was a period I know that people played pop tunes for contra dancing. They played show tunes, they played anything. I mean, it wasn't jigs and reels it was anything that had a melody that you could fit into a 32 bar format. So Bill Bailey Won't you Please Come Home and like, remember Ralph Sweet's [singing squares] like all those kind of popular tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

 Singing squares.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I think a lot of the repertoire for New England contra dancing was sort of a mishmash, and again, I have no reason to believe this is to be true, but I want it to be true, that Dudley somehow said, you know, something, there's this awesome music coming out of England, Ireland, Scotland. This Celtic music, it was the beginning of the rage of Celtic music, the 60s and the 70s. All these bands were coming over to the states and playing. And Dudley was like, I'm gonna use this repertoire and we're gonna make a contra dance band, we're gonna elevate this kind of music. I think other people were I'm sure doing it before him, but he just really good at it, like they had an incredible band and they did play Celtic stuff. They played things, and then Randy and Rodney also similarly, found really great Celtic music to showcase. And now Dudley's really into French music, but at the time, I don't think he was. I don't remember that being a big part of his thing. But again, my involvement with Dudley lasted for between when I was 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12. And then I think that was it. By the time I hit my teenage years, I wasn't interested in it much. Well, I was still contra dancing but I had no reason to be looking up to Dudley because I was listening to Bill Evans and John Coltrane and Charlie Parker, Dudley just wasn't a model for me. I went through this period when went I to Oberlin and so 1976. I went to Oberlin and somebody played me this recording of Clifton Chenier, who, at this point I'm like, wow. I was young. I was introduced to Clifton Chenier, I was 18 years old and I listened to about 30 seconds of it, I'm like, yeah, I'm not into that. Because it wasn't jazz, you know. I kind of missed out on something pretty remarkable. It took me another 15 years or 10 years to come around and realize how awesome it was. So there you go. The blinders of youth.

**Julie Vallimont**

Band name.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yeah, there's the Bloom of Youth and there's the Blinders of Youth.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's been so great just hearing you reflect about all this. We can ask about Dudley and where all those ideas came from. People can write to us and share their stories. The fun thing about Contra Pulse is like, history is a patchwork of everyone's different experiences and no one person has all the history in one place.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I can't end this particular little segment that you're doing without mentioning a couple of more people to me that are important, like [Ruthie Dornfeld](http://www.ruthiedornfeld.com/), for example, who played with [Mary Lea](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-21-mary-lea/) and [Kate Barnes](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-9-kate-barnes/) and Yankee Ingenuity. And that was when I first met Ruthie, she sort of started along with them a contra dance movement in New England. She was a big part of the beginning of that, but then she kind of like, took off on her own. And she started doing this thing with the Cafe, American Cafe Orchestra, which I just thought was like, oh, my God, that's the coolest thing I've ever heard. I met Ruthie and we got to play together and we didn't play many dances together, which is really interesting. We didn't play contra dances at all, until much later. I think, as a training ground for a person, contra dance music can be really awesome. And it is for so many people, it's a great way to make money and get out there and play night after night and practice stuff and work stuff out. That's what Becky and Keith and I were doing every night, like, okay, well, let's try this and let's try that. And if we get good at it, fortunately, and I say this to young people, if you're trying to be a concert band, be careful what you get good at, because if it's dance music, it's a different kettle of fish. It's hard to maintain a career doing both of those things, actually.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you think it's harder to be booked as a concert band if you're also a dance band? Is that because you don't have time to work on repertoire? Like you can't focus on concert stuff 100%? Or is it because people make an association with dance bands? Or both? or neither?

**Jeremiah McLane**

I think both. No, I think it's a complex question. But for sure, Julie, if you're setting out to be a concert band and yet people keep hearing you as a contra dance band, today maybe it's not so true. But back then, I mean, certainly, bands that were contra dance bands were just not seen as viable on the concert stage. And also the training, the things you develop in a contra dance band are not the same skills that you want in a concert band. They're different skills. I mean, the repertoire might actually be the same you might well do the same set for contra dance that you would play in a concert. Becky and Keith and I did that for sure and other bands, I've done that with a lot of bands. But you don't necessarily develop, it's a different animal. It's a completely different animal. So I think you could do both. But again, you've got to major in one minor and the other. But it makes touring easier if you have both, take a night off from dances and play a concert. Or conversely, if you're playing a whole bunch of concerts in a row it can be really great to have a dance, one dance stuck in the middle because it just gives you a night off so to speak.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a good way to generate ideas and be loose and free, depending on the format of the concerts, but at dances you can kind of screw around a little bit, play around.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I would say that yeah, the band called Kalos which is Eric and Ryan and I it's interesting because that's similar in instrumentation to Nightingale it's a DADGAD guitarist who sings, a fiddle player like Becky. There's similarities on some weird level, but it's not a contra dance band. We play contra dances, I think we were talking about the Flurry, we were at the Flurry together. But it's not a band that anybody would hire for a contra dance I don't think. We're just, that's not our thing. But we're sort of focused on playing concerts. And so it's sort of simpler in a way like, oh, we're not really going to do a lot of contra dances. It has made it simpler to do what we're doing and Becky, Keith and I were doing, I think we started with dances and we got good at that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's interesting because like you and Eric and Ryan are all super experienced at playing for contra dances. Ryan plays in the Syncopaths and Eric has played in many bands. But there's a different way of approaching the music I think, you put your setlist together, you choose your music differently, you arrange it differently, different grooves. Even just the freedom of tempos and structures and formats is so, so different. I think it's also what makes a dance band is like being willing to sacrifice a little bit of your music for the sake of the dance experience.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Oh definitely, there's a certain service aspect to being a dance band, we have to be honest. If you're just going out there to fulfill your own needs, I'm not sure that's the right way to approach playing for contra dances. People might accuse the Clayfoot Strutters of occasionally just being somewhat, what's the word? Somewhat ambivalent about the dance experience. I think it's important to play for dancers, if you're going to be there, give them the best night they had, come on. I'm kind of joking about the Clayfoot Strutters, we're a great dance band. I don't mean to be slagging on the Strutters in any way.

**Julie Vallimont**

But also, we all know that the Strutters have earned it too. You know, if you guys are all up there having a good time. I also feel like you've earned it.

**Jeremiah McLane**

The point is that I think, I've lost my train of thought a little bit. We were talking about being a good dance band. You don't want to be a bad dance band. I mean, God, that's awful. But I think you have to serve the dancers. And that's different than being a concert band. At least, again, if you're a pop star, you got to serve your audience, right? I mean, you kind of got to give them what they want. But if you're doing what we do in concert you pretty much you serve something else, but you're not serving the audience. Right? Do you know what I mean? It's different. They're sitting down, you want to give them a good experience. But you can do things. I feel like it's not a big deal actually. It's fun to play for dancing. I haven't done it so much as I used to. So now it's every opportunity is a great gift, like, wow, what a fun thing to be able to do, play for dancing. It's so great. And God help us when will we do it again? I know that's what you're talking to people about.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, you've given so much to the dance world in all your various bands. And I think, like, forget about the question of what's traditional or not, I think you do something with respect, and you try to do it well. Maybe that's even more important than trying to be what ever is quote unquote, traditional is or isn't and not even worry about that. But just respecting whatever the thing is, and trying to do it well and do it passionately. And as a teacher, you bring that out in all of your teaching, as we've taught together, your passion for what you do, and elevating whatever it is, and becoming a better version of yourself as you do it. I think that's been an inspiration for a lot of people.

**Jeremiah McLane**

I think contra dancing, is some of my greatest memories of high school actually was dancing. You know, that feeling of going up, and it's really weird because it's right where I live. What's so ironic is I live in Stratford [Vermont] and Stratford is where I used to come up occasionally when I was in 10th grade or 8th grade, and come up to a dance up here and that was, everything just felt so like, these people come out of the woods. They looked so other like, I guess because they probably lived in a cabin all winter and they would come out for the dance and they would dance and the musicians were playing. I had no idea what they were playing, but it was so awesome. Being a kid and seeing that it was so freakin' exotic to me. So beautiful.

**Julie Vallimont**

It was magic.

**Jeremiah McLane**

It was like kind of sexy but really earthy, like people dancing together and having fun and you could tell the humidity was there and the band was, all that stuff. When I first moved out west when I went to college out west in Seattle, I missed it terribly and I found this contra dance somewhere in Seattle, and I would go and just like kind of when I was homesick, I was just like, remember that? Those McLane family things in this old barn at my grandmother's, I'm sort of getting like nostalgic again, but there is something about that upbringing that I had that's particular to me that, so of course, I would want to do it well, and play music well for people because that's what was shown me, that music and singing especially singing was a big part of it with Dudley, he would always sing. You'd do a couple of dances and then we'd sit down and he would sing. That's a tradition that's a little bit been lost, but I will say that the whole tradition of music making, being entertained, being brought to another place is so important. I guess that's, to not do a good job would be unthinkable or to do less than you can, to not give it everything you have. Why would I do that? It's just that it's so freakin' hard. Right, Julie? It's hard to just keep it all together.

**Julie Vallimont**

But that's part of the fun is always learning ways to do it better.

**Jeremiah McLane**

 I'm curious to know what your project [Julie's album in progress] will sound like.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, me too. I'll keep you posted. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about for this interview?

**Jeremiah McLane**

I said Ruthie's name. I was just thinking of the early influences that are so important. Jimmy Keane, for example, big shout out to Jimmy Keane. If it weren't for Jimmy, he just plays the sh\*\* out of the accordion. And when I first heard him, I'm like, wow. I studied with Jimmy quite a bit, and Jimmy said the nicest thing to me because I made a recording. It might have been Smile when You're Ready, like an early recording. I was kind of embarrassed, you know how you are embarrassed to give something that you've done to your teacher. But he listened to it, he said, Jesus, forget the Irish stuff you should just do your own thing. He was so affirming like, you don't need to learn anything from me about Irish music. Just do your own thing. That's that's a nice thing to hear from a teacher. And Jimmy was was like that for me. Yeah, he's still out there playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

This has been so great, I could talk to you all night but life must go on. Thank you so much for being a part of this. It's been so wonderful to have you.

**Jeremiah McLane**

Yep, it has been and I can't wait to hear the next installment.

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