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Wed, 1/27 4:57PM • 1:33:53

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

play, tunes, dance, people, music, bands, chord, contra, tempo, contra dance, guitar, musicians, sound, good, rhythm, fun, figments, elixir, hear, contra dancing

**SPEAKERS**

Julie Vallimont, Owen Morrison

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello, Owen Morrison and welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Owen Morrison**

Hi, Julie. Thanks for doing this.

**Julie Vallimont**

It is so nice to see you, virtually. We're on Zoom of course, and you are in DC?

**Owen Morrison**

I am in DC, that's where we live. We were actually away from before Thanksgiving all the way through until a few days ago, we were living at my wife's family's house for all that time, kind of getting away from the city and then we've come back.

**Julie Vallimont**

Back to the pad, back to the city. Yeah, we're not gonna talk about politics. But DC is an interesting place to be right now. I can only imagine.

**Owen Morrison**

I think it's true, although we never go outside. So we actually have no idea. It's the same as anywhere else.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember when you lived in Boston for a while and were playing up there.

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah, we lived about a mile apart from each other.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right, you guys lived in Harvard Square. I used to play lots of dances around New England. I sort of got to know you from the dance scene, playing with [Elixir](https://www.elixirmusic.com/about/) and the Figments and some of your other bands. I would just love to start from the very beginning of Owen Morrison. How did you learn your instrument? How did you first start playing for dances? How did you end up in this scene?

**Owen Morrison**

I kind of couldn't avoid it. My dad [[Jim Morrison](http://www.morrisonbrothersband.com/jim.html)] is a caller and a fiddle player and has been since long before I was born. I first started playing violin when I was pretty little. I took from Freyda Epstein, who was a great fiddler in the Charlottesville area and played in a band called Trapezoid. I know a lot of your listeners probably know who she was, she passed away several years ago. I took violin lessons from her and I was around a lot of music. I grew up going to [Pinewoods](https://www.pinewoods.org/) every single year and Buffalo Gap and lots of other places like that. I forget what happened with the with the violin, I really took violin and I never really got a strong fiddle bow but by the time I was in middle school, I was kind of done with that and ready to play electric guitar. I figured out how to do that. I had played some traditional music at first on the on the violin. But for a few years, I just wanted to play. What did I do? Really bad rock music and I got into blues a little bit and played with my friends and it was fun but it didn't sound great. I guess that's relative. And then what happened? I was around all these great musicians in Charlottesville, all my parents' friends. And pretty quickly I figured out that it was more fun to play with them, just because they were better musicians, and they would teach me things and it was lots of fun. So I started playing some with my dad and some with other people around town. That just led me into playing fiddle tunes of various sorts, which was what I had grown up with anyway, so I was pretty familiar with it. That's the beginning, you want more?

**Julie Vallimont**

Keep going,

**Owen Morrison**

So then my dad just became opportunistic and decided he had one son that played drums, my brother had played drums in the middle school jazz band and various other ways, and one that was playing electric guitar, and he just decided that we could be in a band and play for the local contra dances. So we really didn't know hardly anything. I mean, he knew what he was doing. He knew loads of tunes, and he got me to learn chords after a fashion. Will just kind of banged along the way he felt was right, actually he had good taste and was pretty good at that. So we started playing the dances in Greenwood [Virginia], I'll bet you played there at some point.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's a fun dance.

**Owen Morrison**

And the Charlottesville local dance too. Over time, I just got more and more into it and started listening to other kinds of trad forms and other really great guitar players, especially in bluegrass. I got to hear Tony Rice, and Brian Sutton, and David Greer, loads of people at the Charlottesville, at the [Prism](https://prismcoffeehouse.org/) it was called, the place where we heard live music. I was just kind of exposed to a lot of really, really great guitar playing. That got me interested in playing more, more and more fiddle tunes and less and less Nirvana or Smashing Pumpkins or whatever else.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, 90s grunge rock.

**Owen Morrison**

When I was 15 years old I could play for a dance and make like 100 bucks. And that was so much better than mowing a bunch of lawns or mulching someone's yard for way less money. So it seemed like a really good gig at the time and unfortunately, I never moved on. I'm still doing it [laughter].

**Julie Vallimont**

It didn't scale upwards as you got older, the pay?

**Owen Morrison**

No, probably mulching wouldn't have either.

**Julie Vallimont**

Fair enough. So your first contra band was the cleverly named [[The] Morrison Brothers](http://www.morrisonbrothersband.com/).

**Owen Morrison**

That's true, with my brother and my dad, the other brother.

**Julie Vallimont**

And your dad, the other brother.

**Owen Morrison**

He lobbied hard for that name. He wanted to be a brother. He has two brothers, but he wanted to be our brothers too.

**Julie Vallimont**

And your dad, Jim Morrison, is quite a character. He has a lot of charisma, personality and a lot of experience in all sorts of parts of the dance scene.

**Owen Morrison**

That's right. And he's still at it. He's not calling as much as he used to. He still cares deeply about Morris dancing and does that when he can although this year has been different for everybody. And he's playing fiddle every single day.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, amazing. Does he mostly play old time?

**Owen Morrison**

He plays a lot of old time and that's probably the thing that he's done the most and really has studied the most. He's a big fan of John Ashby's playing, John was a fiddler in the [Free State Ramblers](https://fieldrecorder.bandcamp.com/album/frc-108-john-ashby-the-free-state-ramblers-recordings-from-the-collection-of-ray-alden) for decades. And he still...again in previous years...makes regular get togethers with John Ashby's son who's still living, Skip Ashby and several other members of the original band and that kind of family clan, that'll play that music. So we've played lots of old time music in that vein, but he's also a big fan of Irish fiddlers and really fiddlers from many places. Just like contra dance music is a mixture of so many different types of fiddle styles. He's kind of soaked that up, as have I.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because for your own personal guitar playing, you have a lot of different things in your wheelhouse and all these different influences, like old time and bluegrass, but then you also studied classical guitar and flamenco. How did you get drawn towards that?

**Owen Morrison**

Towards the classical or flamenco?

**Julie Vallimont**

How did you end up going in that direction from Nirvana?

**Owen Morrison**

I'd always loved classical music. That was the first thing I listened to a regular basis. I had a tape of the Four Seasons, and I had a tape of Water Music with the Royal Fireworks on the other side, I think. I listened to those when I was going to bed on my little Walkman. Baroque music was the stuff that I liked to play the most on the violin when I was playing that. So that was kind of in my ear. I think I got to college, and I thought I would study biology or something else and then realized I was going to spend all my time playing guitar and I might as well get credit for it, or I wasn't going to do very well. So I looked around, and the music department was basically mostly classical. There was a little bit of jazz, but it was classical. I thought, I can do that, and then I got really, really into it. I played classical guitar for four hours a day for the four years I was there. The teacher was really great. [Kami Rowan](https://www.guilford.edu/profile/krowan) at [Guilford College](https://www.guilford.edu/) was fantastic and it was just a good fit for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then where did the flamenco...you actually went to Spain, didn't you?

**Owen Morrison**

I love flamenco. I can't really play it. I did study it. I had an hour class a day for the semester I was there. I was there five months. I studied it pretty hard. I've listened to it a lot. I've worked at it but it's the kind of thing that you really need to be steeped in and spend years doing rather than months, even with a lot of guitar technique already. You have to learn the music so completely through and through probably like many forms of traditional music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Owen Morrison**

So I learned a lot of technique, and I learned a lot about it. But I can't say that I could do a flamenco concert right now, or at any point. I have used just kind of the things I learned in Spain in my compositions and in my playing a bit.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think when you're playing for a dance, you can play pretty solid rhythm. That's the understatement of the century. You're like a rhythm machine when you get going with the feet and the guitar. But you also have this amazing technique that lets you do all sorts of other things. You can play lead, you can flatpick, you can play all these cool textural ideas and stuff like that. When you're playing for dances, how would you describe your guitar style? What elements from your playing do you pull in most often? And how do you use those when you're playing for dances?

**Owen Morrison**

It's true that most of the time when I practice guitar or the things that I've really worked at on the guitar, are not what I do at all when I'm playing for dances. Because the guitar is a rhythm instrument and you're accompanying, one, the dancers and two, the music, maybe it's the other way around, I'm not sure. But either way, you really have to support both. And especially playing for contra dancing, when people respond to a really good solid groove and they also respond to the emotion that you can put into it, and the dynamics that can come out. You kind of have to ignore all those things that you've practiced and just be a rhythm machine, as you said, and you have to pump out energy. You have to just focus on the feeling, rather than the little parts that you might be more worried about in a recording or even in a concert. It's really about the feel of the music. I think the way I've practiced and developed my style, and that is just by playing for contra dances, and luckily, they go on for so long. When you play them, you play for so many hours in an evening or in a weekend that you get a lot of time to practice what you're doing while you're doing it, while you're on the job. I've developed a style of kind of relentless rhythm. Every now and then I get to do some of the other stuff that I've practiced so much.

**Julie Vallimont**

For any guitarists who might be listening, or curious piano players, such as myself, how would you kind of describe your style? Is it more like a boom chuck kind of guitar style most of the time or strummy strummy, these are non technical words. How would you describe your guitar style?

**Owen Morrison**

I play boom chunk guitar more than most current trad players or contra dance players, I think. That's certainly how I first learned, just playing in old time jams in the Charlottesville area. I definitely learned that you play the bass note and then you strum, and you play the bass note, and you strum. Also listening to [Bob McQuillen](http://mastersoftraditionalarts.org/artists/216?selected_facets=tradition_exact:Dancer) and other kind of older contra piano players, that was the way to do it. They did so well that that was how I kind of was brought up to play rhythm. I definitely don't do that, I probably don't do it even most of the time anymore. I just do it more than other guitar players at this point. I've also been influenced a lot by Irish players, [John Doyle](https://www.johndoylemusic.com/) and the likes. What else? I don't really have names for all the things that I do. Boom chunk is something that many people recognize. You're right that these are not technical terms. I don't know what to say next, you can ask your next question.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm kind of visualizing like what it would look like in your hands. I think of the boom chuck style is more of like a downbeat and then a crisp, upbeat and kind of baseline driven. Whereas I think of DADGAD guitar as more kind of a continuous kind of strummy strummy strummy arm motion.

**Owen Morrison**

I do both of those things. Although I don't play DADGAD very much. I use standard tuning. I just find little tricks to make it ringy and very strummy like you're talking about.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, you can get that open feeling if you're careful about what voicings you use and stuff like that. And playing classical, you're probably used to stretching your fingers really far and hard for hard intervals and things like that, that a lot of people probably can't do.

**Owen Morrison**

That's true.

**Julie Vallimont**

I took six months of classical guitar lessons in high school. I was never good at it, but just enough to understand the concepts of what is involved.

**Owen Morrison**

There's some stretching that's involved and you have small hands.

**Julie Vallimont**

I have small hands. That's why I remember the finger stretching more than just about anything else. I was like, you know, this is great, I'm just gonna stick with campfire songs and I'm gonna play the piano.

**Owen Morrison**

I think that's worked out well.

**Julie Vallimont**

Good life choice. I still have my classical guitar. I've owned it for 30 something years and I don't ever play it. I should just sell it to someone, anyone who wants a classical guitar just write to me. So how did you end up forming your other bands?

**Owen Morrison**

Let's see. The next one I can think of is probably Night Watch, which I formed with [Naomi Morse](https://www.thepoorcousins.com/about-us) and Elvie Miller. I grew up going to Pinewoods with both of them. They were friends from a pretty early age. At some point, when we were teenagers at Pinewoods, we were all just very, very into playing tunes. We stayed up all night every night doing it. Probably our first time playing dances together was just at the camper nights at Pinewoods camp. And pretty quickly as teenagers, we decided we wanted to play in a band and we started playing for dances, mostly in the southeast, I think. We did tours during our breaks from school. We'd line up 10 days worth of dances in a row and drive across I-40 both directions every day. I'm sure you've done that tour too, and that's great. I still love playing so much with both of them. Elvie Miller now lives in Ireland and Naomi Morse has been in Brooklyn, New York, although I think she's been in Vermont more recently, where she's from.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, temporarily.

**Owen Morrison**

Near you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, near me during COVID. She's been hanging out up here a bit.

**Owen Morrison**

So they're two of my favorite musicians to play with. And actually those same camps and musical connections that's where I've met a lot of people that I still play with, [Ethan Hazzard-Watkins](https://www.ethanhw.com/) and [Anna Patton](https://www.annapatton.com/) are people I've played with, for, I don't know, 15 years now. I met them at Pinewoods. I think we were all staying in Hunsdon House together at some point when I was 19, I think. They got me to come and do a tour in California. That was our very first gig as the Figments and we still play together. We've been doing some virtual contra dances this year. Then all three of us are also in Elixir, which is a larger band with trombone and trumpet. That's kind of become more well known but when we first played on the west coast, I forget when the first dance weekend that Elixir did on the west coast, they had to advertise it as members of the Figments are coming to play because no one knew who Elixir was. But the Figments had played on the west coast a whole bunch, that was kind of our stomping ground, I think because we both had family out there and that was why we organized our tours on the west coast.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's funny to bill Elixir as Figments plus horns.

**Owen Morrison**

We don't do that anymore.

**Julie Vallimont**

Elixir certainly has a name for itself now. I've been slowly interviewing all the members of Elixir. I have interviewed Anna and Nils so far. But we haven't heard a lot of Elixir stories. So if you have any stories, always happy to hear them.

**Owen Morrison**

We played in Nashville one time for what do they call it? The [Music City Masquerade](https://www.nashvillecountrydancers.org/music-city-masquerade) I think, it's a Halloween dance weekend and it's really fun. I love doing it. If anyone's listening and they have some pull with [Susan Kevra](https://susankevra.com/) or anyone else there, I'd be happy to go back.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a great weekend and Susan is a great host.

**Owen Morrison**

Elixir played it some number of years ago and we decided we'd be the Village People for Halloween and we all picked our character. I think Nils was the macho man guy and he wore tiny little shorts and basically nothing but hair, just chest hair and shorts. Anna was the biker girl, or biker, she had a leather jacket and all that stuff. I was the cowboy and I think I was living in Boston by then so I had to fly to Nashville. I went to that place in Central Square that that does costumes, I forget the name of it, and I got my cowboy outfit.

**Julie Vallimont**

[The Garment District](https://garmentdistrict.com/)?

**Owen Morrison**

I think I went to the Garment District.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, classic. You can buy costumes by the pound at the Garment District.

**Owen Morrison**

So I got all my stuff for my cowboy outfit. I could pack it in my suitcase except the stupid $5 cardboard cowboy hat that I had gotten didn't go in my suitcase with all my gear. So I had to wear it. So here I am, I get on the plane from Boston, I get off the plane in Nashville, Tennessee with my guitar and my cardboard cowboy hat. Here I am in Nashville. It was so embarrassing. I had to leave it there. I couldn't do it on the way home, just the hat, not the guitar.

**Julie Vallimont**

Having a dance weekend with costumes is a great strategy for just having fun. [Buddy System](https://buddysystemband.com/) played that weekend and we brought some kind of costumes. We used to just wear onesies on stage. It's kind of like our thing. But [Genticorum](https://www.genticorum.com/english) was the other band and they didn't have costumes, but intrepid fun seekers that they are, they went to a thrift store and came back with lampshades. They all wore lampshades on their head for the Saturday night dance. Just glorious.

**Owen Morrison**

How long did that last?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, it's pretty hard to do fiddle and foot percussion and wear a lampshade I imagine. So some of them kept their lampshades on longer than others. but the point was made, certainly.

**Owen Morrison**

I agree. I love dance weekends with costumes and themes. In fact, that same weekend when I was living in Nashville, I think [Tidal Wave](http://home.total.net/~j.saintcyr/index_eng.html) came. I think it was Tidal Wave. And they had these great blow up suits that had fans on the back that kept them inflated. I think [Stuart Kenney](http://www.stuartkenney.com/) had this one that made him look like a body builder but the others just had these kind of down homey farmy overall wearing giant people in blow up suits. When Rachel sat down at the piano, she's very small, she sat down, and all the air went up and it went up above her head and she couldn't see. It was brilliant. They were really great.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's really great. So this little things, just those little things. When I was first sort of learning to play for dances, Elixir was already like a thing. So you guys must have played your share of dance weekends by now and your share of tours. I remember the first time I think I heard you play was at the Scout House in Boston, obviously where I was living. And Nils was calling and it was like back in the days when the Scout House would be so full you couldn't get in the door practically, there's like a line outside. There must have been some special event or you were just very dapper because I remember you were wearing some kind of powder blue 70s polyester leisure suit kind of thing.

**Owen Morrison**

That's actually a pretty good description. We used to do ugly suit night, although...some people called it that, I thought that was the nicest suit I had at the time. But yeah, we used to dress up. That was one of the things that we did. In fact, my dad got married in that polyester blue suit. I think it's from a fancy place in New York, Barney's or somewhere. But he got married in 1974 I think, '73 one of those years. And fashion was different back then.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's good to know that you were wearing a high quality blue polyester suit. I could feel its styling from across the hall. You know, the suit just radiated energy, so that's my first memory of you.

**Owen Morrison**

I have another one of those suits. I think Ethan might have been wearing it. It's plaid and it has giant lapels and bell bottoms.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was that also your dad's?

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah, that was also my dad's. So those are the only two suits I had until I got married.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow. Then you bought a suit for your wedding?

**Owen Morrison**

My wife insisted on that. I bought one. I have a nice suit I can wear, if you're ever getting married and you want to hire Elixir or someone else, one of my bands, I can wear a nicer suit.

**Julie Vallimont**

Don't worry everyone he cleans up all right. That's great. And then you played for let's see, what are the other bands we haven't talked about yet?

**Owen Morrison**

Well, let's see the one after Night Watch, Night Watch played for a long time. [House Red](https://www.amazon.com/Uncorked-by-House-Red/dp/B01KB3H5CQ) was a band that was really fun to play for. They're two of my best friends Shawn Brennaman and Jonathan Thielen. Jonathan's in Greensboro, North Carolina where I went to college, and that's how I started playing with them. I think my first gig with them was like, Tuesday of the very first week I was in my freshman year of college at Guilford, they found out that I was coming there and they just said, hey, will you come play with us? So it was in Winston Salem, North Carolina, which was such a fun dance for so many years. And yeah, House Red, we weren't fancy, we played piano, fiddle and guitar. I think we were fun to dance to though. We had fun together and we played good solid dance music.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, at its heart, that's all you need. Right? You need some good solid dance music. The rest is bells and whistles.

**Owen Morrison**

We played for a bunch of years. And who else? I played loads of freelance stuff and played here and there with other people. The bands I played with the most are the Morrison brothers. We still play on occasion. We do maybe three or four dance weekends, or weekends of gigs a year. My brother is in the Charlottesville area where I grew up and where my parents still live. My dad plays at any chance he can get and so we still have fun together.

**Julie Vallimont**

So Charlottesville has a great dance community. People are so friendly. We spent a little bit of time there just like playing. It's always exciting to get invited to play in a really cool community, you know, like, I can't wait to meet these people. I had met some folks at Pinewoods before that. So it was really nice to go there and like kind of know, I knew Rya Martin. Piano players tend to bond with each other. They're so nice, they're so welcoming and so fun. I think I met Paul Rosen at Pinewoods, maybe or maybe I met him at Catapult. Anyway, there's a lot of really great people there and very friendly community, Charlottesville is a really cool town and I love being there. So I'm sort of jealous you got to grow up in that scene.

**Owen Morrison**

I remember the Charlottesville Fall Festivals were going on all through my childhood. When I really got into playing guitar, I looked forward to those. I was always grateful that the musicians in the bands that came, many of them were very happy to stay up late playing at the party after the dance. I think that's when I first met [Sam Bartlett](https://www.sambartlett.com/), who I've always admired and have have played with over the years. I remember playing with him very late and who else? [Larry Unger](https://www.larryunger.net/), although I met him and played with him at Pinewoods, I think too. But thanks to all those musicians who stay up late playing with the dancers and the local musicians, it makes a big deal.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely. That's one of my favorite things about a dance weekend is the after jam after the dance weekend. Like if you go to a town with a good music scene, and you just stay up and play tunes till 2am, it's the best. It really is.

**Owen Morrison**

Especially if you don't have to play for waltzes at 8:30 in the morning.

**Julie Vallimont**

I know, I think dance organizers should realize that musicians want to jam all night. Even though the dancers want to waltz at 9am, they always want to waltz at 9am. So we do both.

**Owen Morrison**

It's a good time to mention that I have a waltz recording. You can play that at 9am. I don't need to talk about it. I just want them to play it at 9am.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you can kind of wander in through part of it. I always, on Sundays of a dance weekend would get in this habit of just, why bother with breakfast. There's no time, you roll out of bed, you grab a protein shake or an apple, you just kind of eat it on stage in between tunes.

**Owen Morrison**

Yes, that's my strategy,

**Julie Vallimont**

Survival strategies. I feel like spending your time growing up at Pinewoods just prepares you for that. You know, it's like training. I remember my first time at Pinewoods. There was so much cool stuff going on. I stayed up every night until 4am at American week, jamming and I think Larry and Sam, were there, just jamming all night, and then you go for a swim. I don't know if I'm supposed to say that. I don't know if you're supposed to swim at 4am but we did and it was great.

**Owen Morrison**

I don't think there's any rule against that unless you're under 18 or...

**Julie Vallimont**

No, no, it was cool. It was cool. So you get trained to stay up late and play. Oh, actually, the first year I played at English and American Week [CDSS week at Pinewoods] you were kind enough or whatever enough to hire me. I was in your dad's English country dance class in the morning at 9am.

**Owen Morrison**

How'd that go?

**Julie Vallimont**

It was interesting for me because I was relatively new to playing English. I'd only been doing it for a few years. Your dad has this really interesting repertoire of English country dances, which is very different than what I had seen in Boston.

**Owen Morrison**

I believe that.

**Julie Vallimont**

So, spoiler alert, I did not know any of the tunes. And so there's this magical feeling of sight reading music at 9am, after having been up till 4am. I think the other people I was playing with, you need one good person to kind of hold it down and show you how it goes and they're supportive.

**Owen Morrison**

Who was in your band?

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't remember, I was so, so tired but I remember it being fun. I'm sure I could look it up. But that was when I first realized there's this whole other repertoires, and other ways of doing English country dance besides the way I had seen it in Boston, which is my main first exposure to it. Did you play much for English when you were like in your teens?

**Owen Morrison**

No, I've done that more recently. I love it though, especially the kind of Baroque era ones, it's really fun to takes tunes like that and then allow them to be folk music, not have to play them in a in a classical way. But you can still play with the counterpoint stuff that if you're able, when I'm able, but it's really fun to play that kind of music in a kind of traditional way where you can experiment with it.

**Julie Vallimont**

You can focus on your tone more and have more room to play the melody and do more melodic and harmonic things besides just playing rhythm.

**Owen Morrison**

Right. Yeah, I enjoy that too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's fun. Do the Figments ever play English? I mean, all three of you have...

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah we do, I enjoy it a lot. I think all three of us enjoy it. Anna is a superstar in the English world. There are still places that are quite resistant to not having piano in the English country dance band. Although, I think when I first started playing for contra dances, there were many places that didn't want to have a contra dance without a piano. And now that's just so common to have a guitar led band, rhythmic wise. But yes, certainly 30 years ago, am I that old? I'm not that old, 20 years ago, it was, in some places, kind of unusual to not have piano in the band at a contra dance and that's still common at English country dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember listening to the Figments, just talking about you and Ethan and Anna made me think of that. Watching your interactions, versus in Elixir where you guys are playing a lot of arrangements. There's room for improvisation, but you have all these really great horn parts and kind of arcs to your arrangements. In Figments, it seemed like the three of you were just kind of playing off of each other and doing all these different sounds and textures. I really enjoyed that, do you want to talk about the different roles that you have in each of those bands?

**Owen Morrison**

Sure, you're an astute listener, because that's exactly right.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was stalking you.

**Owen Morrison**

I think of the Figments as an antidote to Elixir. Because in Elixir, everything is so prescribed, there's room for improvisation. It's kind of like the big band style improvisation, there's a form and we stick to the form most of the time. There's times where any individual gets to improvise, or maybe two people get to play off each other and do some improvisation. But with the Figments, we just do that all the time. We hear something and we go with it and we never do the same thing twice and there's no arrangements at all. It's been really fun, because we've been playing together for 15 years or so. We can hear where each other are going, that's a hard thing to say. We can hear, we're so familiar with each other's playing that we very quickly can move in a different direction with them. That's a really fun thing to do and no matter how good the musicians are, it takes time to get that with other people. So I'm glad to have that in my musical life. I also like playing with Elixir, it's really fun too, and because we can put so much thought into the arrangements we can we can do really cool things that aren't possible otherwise. They're kind of like a yin and a yang and I really need them both.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely, I feel the same way. Great to be able to be in both of those musical places. I'm trying to help you out by like saying helpful things occasionally so you can sip that delicious looking beer that you have over there.

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah it's almost gone. I might open another in a bit. It's a [Bells "Two Herated Ale](http://www.bellsbeer.com/beer/year-round/two-hearted-ale)." They did not pay me to say this but it's, they're from Michigan. Bells, they make a very good beer. It's my favorite. It's "Two Hearted Ale." Safeway delivers it for about $19 a 12-pack. I've gone through a lot this pandemic.

**Julie Vallimont**

You can get beer delivered to your house?

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah in DC you can get anything delivered!

**Julie Vallimont**

Woah.....

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah it's a whole new world.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a whole new world. I'm in Brattleboro and I can't get anything delivered to my house now except Domino's Pizza and Chinese food.

**Owen Morrison**

Well I'm sorry to hear that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's okay, there's sunshine and fresh air and empty space and those things are also great.

**Owen Morrison**

Lots of space outside without many people. That's nice.

**Julie Vallimont**

And a great dancing scene, if only I were able to enjoy it, you know? It'll all be back. So in Elixir, when you're coming up with arrangements, I think people always assume that the fiddler is doing the arranging and the rhythm player is just kind of doing whatever. I have a feeling that you have a pretty active compositional role in some of that stuff. How wrong am I?

**Owen Morrison**

That's not true in any of the bands I play in that the fiddler really does the arrangement role. Often fiddlers can do all sorts of things and they don't stick to just playing the tune over and over again. But even in an in a more kind of casual setting where you don't have strict arrangements, I find in the music that I do that the rhythm section is way more free than the melody section. The melody plays the tune, and they improvise over the chords, but the rhythm section has so much, you can change the meter, you can change whether you're playing a kind of a fast harmonic rhythm or a slow harmonic rhythm, you can change the chords completely. That kind of stuff really gets to the kind of emotional quality of the music and what dancers feel when they're dancing. So there's that. And then certainly say, with Elixir, where we do have highly arranged stuff, all of us kind of take turns doing things, some of us will bring a tune to the band and it's very modular, the way we put things together. So it's not actually that it has to be the same all the way through for 10 minutes. But with any given tune we might have three or four things that we do with it. We'll just kind of communicate on stage saying, we're gonna do, ABCD, whatever with various hip shaking or head nodding that we can do while we're on stage and playing instruments. And that's how we communicate with which module to stack on next, if that makes sense.

**Julie Vallimont**

I find that approach really great for playing for dances where you have a kind of a planned out section, and then some stretch of time where you're just kind of improvising or chugging along until the next thing happens. Like even just like scripting out transitions and knowing what your first tune is and your second tune. So instead of having a script, it's like having an outline, to me. I don't know if that's how it feels to you in Elixir. Then you can match what's happening on the floor and some callers like to run the dance 20 times through and some only run it 15 times through and it lets you be flexible for all those kinds of things.

**Owen Morrison**

Right. We definitely have to do that a lot, and it's good that we do that. But Elixir is probably a little more scripted than what you just described.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, probably, you guys have iPads on stage.

**Owen Morrison**

We have some flexibility.

**Julie Vallimont**

You have the tech, the iPads and the little foot switches that let you turn pages without having to use your hands, the horn players.

**Owen Morrison**

I don't have any of that stuff. I don't look at music.

**Julie Vallimont**

You have all the chords in your head?

**Owen Morrison**

Right. But some people do. And you're right, they have foot switches and technology. Not as much technology as you have the last few times I've seen you play.

**Julie Vallimont**

It depends on what incarnation you're talking about. Just for our listeners when you were talking about harmonic rhythm before is that like how fast the chords change? Is that what you mean by that?

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah. Do they change every beat? Do they change every measure? Do you let them go over several measures and have these really long kind of sonic, what would you call it, sonic environments or something that just kind of last for a long time before they shift? Or are they just constantly changing?

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a really powerful trick of having chords that take a measure or two measures each, and then have them come really quickly, or vice versa. If you have a quick chord progression, and all of a sudden, you're holding it for like, half an A part before you change or whatever, or B part. It's a really great device.

**Owen Morrison**

I agree. And again, it's not something that would necessarily be interesting to concert goers, or it may be, but it's something that people feel, they're just listening for different things when they're dancing. And that kind of thing, really, they don't have to hear it intentionally for it to just get into the way that they move in the way that they feel the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, partly you're setting up an expectation, and then tweaking that expectation all of a sudden, the thing is there but different, and that perks up everybody's attention and that's so fun. What are your other favorite tricks? Sorry what were you gonna say?

**Owen Morrison**

Even if you don't get their attention, it just changes what they're doing. You know? And that's kind of great that you can change the way people are feeling the music and moving to the music, whether they realize it or not. And many people do realize that, I'm not saying I'm a magician or anything, but it has an effect and it doesn't matter whether people recognize it or not. So what are other favorite tricks? It's really hard to put into words, I don't know. I kind of have to do something for 10 minutes, and then kind of let it evolve to realize what it is that I want to come out.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, probably you have things that you've just internalized so much over so many years of playing, and like growing up with this music, that you just do them like V chords and inversions.

**Owen Morrison**

I think that's right. I like to play with basslines a lot. Most of the bands I play with don't have a bass, at least not under normal circumstances, so I tend to play moving basslines all the time. I've just developed a style that brings out the bass quite a lot. I don't know whether that's a trick or whether that's something that people even respond to, but it's something that I think about a lot and enjoy doing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you use an octave pedal?

**Owen Morrison**

I do use an octave pedal, yes. I think other people have done it before. I think I got it from Adam Broome, who was using it very subtly with [Crowfoot](https://www.crowfootmusic.com/). He just had this very kind of gentle touch with the octave pedal. And then I got one and I did not do it subtly at all. If I turn it on it's like a big electric bass in the hall and I'm not sorry.

**Julie Vallimont**

No, it's great. I mean, that's such a great feeling. When you're dancing, and all of a sudden this bass comes in when there's been no bass before that. It's like the bass drop. It's so great.

**Owen Morrison**

I know. Bass adds a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those lower frequencies pass through and move your body in a totally different way. That's why I thought electronic music...why I love it for dancing. Those bass frequencies they just move through you, the highs don't travel very far and they get blocked by things and they can be harsh. If the hall is noisy or people are talking it's reverberant. That's actually one of my tricks if I'm running sound. I'm just rambling about bass because I really love bass. That's why I love the piano. But if you don't want the sound so loud, if you have a little more bass in your sound, you don't have to turn this the volume up as much. It's more about people being able to feel it than it is about them being able to hear every nuance blasted in their ears where it's no longer a nuance. I think that I'm saying this very tongue-in-cheek because the rest of you are listening to this and can't see my facial expressions right now. I think an octave pedal is a great way to compensate for the shortcomings of the guitar compared to the piano.

**Owen Morrison**

Okay, fair enough.

**Julie Vallimont**

So I'm glad that you guys have discovered what will make your instrument truly complete.

**Owen Morrison**

I enjoy doing it but I don't do it all the time. That makes for a nice contrast between the sweet sounds of a normal guitar and the low end that makes it sound more like pop music, because pop music has definitely discovered that bass is very important. That's why every rock band and every pop band has very present bass.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and now, all pop music kind of sounds the same, because it's all kind of mixed the same. You know, like not a lot of mids, a lot of highs and a lot of bass and kind of super compressed. And now we've gotten used to hearing that like full spectrum of sound, and blowing out our car speakers. I feel like our whole nation has just blown out our car speakers over the last 20 years.

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah, the people who mix and master music are kind of like you I think they really like bass a lot. Modern recordings tend to tend to turn it up a whole lot, those car speakers certainly hear it, certainly feel it.

**Julie Vallimont**

So in addition to doing guitar, you also do foot percussion. Where did you learn to do that?

**Owen Morrison**

I think again, I'm kind of sounding like a broken record. I'm pretty sure I first started doing it at Pinewoods, when I was a teenager. There were a number of people that I saw that did it there, certainly [Keith Murphy](https://blackislemusic.com/bios-press-kit/keith-murphy), and others. I think I just started by sitting around the sidelines of the dance hall, and playing along, doing foot percussion along with whoever was playing and then that transitioned into jamming. It's funny how it can be so easy to do, and then so hard to do while you play. And then eventually, you keep doing it and then you don't think about it and it's not hard at all to do while you play. It's even maybe harder to do without playing an instrument. I don't know why that is, it's kind of like playing two hands on the piano or something. I remember when I learned to play piano I couldn't do it at all, play two different things with my right hand and my left hand. I worked at it and worked at it and then one day, I could do it. It's not like I was perfect at it but I just had the skill and I could apply it to many tunes. I don't know, if you had that, you probably don't even remember, that early in your piano career.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was little, I think it's about building muscle memory and transferring that stuff from your conscious thought into kind of motor memory that you can call on later. I think learning to do foot percussion, a lot of it is just putting it in your motor memory, and learning how to do them together. But brains are funny, I remember learning two-hand [hands moving separately] stuff in classical piano and now I always tell my students that way, if you run into something hard, you have to practice each hand separately. And then slowly put them together. And even like some of the two hands, with Buddy System because Noah is doing foot percussion and fiddle, I can do whatever I want to as a rhythm player, which is all this freedom I never had before. I got into doing these really complicated two hand riffs where the left hand is really syncopated, and the hands are totally not together. I could not just sit down at the piano and play that. I'd have to challenge myself to do something and then do it really slow and literally think, okay, the left thumb is going to go down now and now my right thumb is going to go down and talk myself like a gymnastics routine through this riff that I was playing and practice it through a metronome and practice it to a metronome slow, so slow, and then faster and faster and faster.

**Owen Morrison**

But that is an interesting thing about the human body that we can do something that is so impossible one day, and then just through a little bit of repetition, we can make it seem like second nature and and just be able to do it. So that's cool. That's how we learn our instruments, right? It's impossible the first day.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely, so I hope this is helpful for people out there. I remember that at the beginning, boom chucking took so much concentration, like playing for contra dances was one of the most mentally exhausting things I had ever done. I'm trying to think about my own parts and my bandmates, and the dancers and the caller and the tune. And then I reached a point where I could just talk while boom chucking. Then I reached a point where I could play boom chuck while doing just about anything with my hands still there, but I could be having a full on conversation with somebody with my head turned away from the piano, and I would still always have this weird sense of where I was in the tune. You play stuff in loops for long enough you start to internalize it. Did that kind of thing happen to you at some point?

**Owen Morrison**

Yes, for sure. It's second nature and I don't really remember that transition. I don't think about where I am in the tune very much or like what what I'm doing rhythmically but that allows you to then think about what you want to do harmonically or what you want to do interesting from a rhythmic or emotional standpoint in the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you have favorite chords or favorite chord progressions?

**Owen Morrison**

Sure, I have a favorite chord just of the moment and I've put it in a few of my recent compositions and it's kind of cliche, but it's, what is it? It's the V of vi. So if you're in a major key, I is major and vi is minor, it's a relative minor and the V chord of that vi chord, it's built on the iii, but it's not the iii because the iii would be minor, obviously. So it's like a dominant seven [V7] that would be the V of the vi. So say we're in C major, A minor is the relative minor, and E major or E7 would be that chord. That's just the the chord of the moment for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

So an E7 in the key of C?

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah, that's right. That's the chord in the Old Home Place, which I think is on JD Crowe in the New South album from sometime in the 70s and Tony Rice played on it. I listened to that record over and over and over again in high school. And that's the chord, it's the second chord in the chorus of the Old Home Place.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did that kind of blow your mind when you heard it for the first time?

**Owen Morrison**

It did, yeah. But also, it's kind of weird that I haven't moved past that. I wouldn't have put that together until we just talked about it right now, that that's the chord I've been really having fun with playing piano and writing pieces in the last few months. That's the chord that I was getting excited about and playing in a bluegrass song when I was 16 years old. Wow, that's kind of pathetic.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like the plot of a Hallmark movie, the chord you've been searching for has been with you your whole life. It was just wearing dorky glasses, and you didn't know.

**Owen Morrison**

Except that in that tune, in that song, it resolves to the IV chord instead of resolving to the vi chord where you expect it to go. I don't know if that makes any difference.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, resolution matters. I think that chord has an interesting tension, because in the key of C an E major chord has a G sharp, which clashes with the fifth of the chord, which is normal, like the C chord normally is based around a natural G. So there's a really interesting tension there of like, this doesn't belong here.

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah, you just found the note that's not in the key of C.

**Julie Vallimont**

And so, Siri just came on, and Siri wants to get involved in our conversation about harmony? Well, you had just released a whole album of waltzes and maybe this would be a fun time to talk about your compositions. I'd love to hear about the tunes you've written and also how you write tunes and how you approach that?

**Owen Morrison**

Sure. Yeah, I did. I think it's almost, it might be two years old now, that album, but it is my newest recording. They're all waltzes that I wrote over the course of at least a dozen years. I didn't work for a year to make this. I'd been planning it and thinking about it for a really long time. I wrote a lot of waltzes, and these were the ones that I liked the best, they're my my favorites. I got Naomi Morse, who I mentioned earlier, who played in Night Watch, to play fiddle on it, and Anna Patton, who I played with for so many years, to play clarinet, and then [Dave Haughey](http://davehaugheymusic.com/) played cello on it and [Eden MacAdam-Somer](https://edenmacadamsomer.wordpress.com/biography/) plays violin on it as well. It was really fun to work with fantastic musicians and just think about how it's gonna go together when I was arranging it. What else can I say about it? I spent a lot of years working on it, it's not something that just came together all of a sudden. It was many, many years of working on arrangements and then setting them aside and kind of planning them for later on. So I'm really happy with the way it came out. I'm glad I did that before the lockdown started. It's nice to have couple dance music at home.

**Julie Vallimont**

It is, for one person, two people, one person plus a dog or a cat, whatever you got around with you, five people.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember asking you years ago and I think you said something I didn't realize at the time, but you said you write a lot of waltzes on piano because you're sort of like one of those people who's like a stealth piano player where you play it, but not in public a lot.

**Owen Morrison**

That's right. I never play it in public. Almost everything I write is on piano. It's just such a logical instrument, you have the low notes are down there, and the high notes are up there and the middle notes are in the middle. And every time you go up one note, it goes up, it's just so simple. You can see everything, you can see how the chords are laid out how melodies are laid out. So, not to say that it's an easy instrument to play. I've written some things on guitar and I've written some of the things I like best on guitar, actually, but the piano is what I play the most when I'm at home, and what I certainly turn to for composition because I can think about the chords and the melody at the same time in a way that it's just more challenging to do on the guitar. I don't write a lot of music, but I write on occasion, and I usually work quite a bit to get the compositions that I make sound the way I want them. I know many people write tunes, and they just like crank them out and they write a tune and then it's good the way it is. And they let leave it be at that and then move on to the next. I think I tend to just kind of spend a lot more time tweaking, for better for worse, it's not that my tunes are necessarily any better than the ones that people crank out and move on to the next. But that's just my style of doing it. So I'm not super prolific but I do enjoy composing tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

So when you're tweaking them, are you tweaking the notes of the melody or the chord structure or the arrangement?

**Owen Morrison**

All of the above.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you write a tune, do you have the chords in mind? I find, as a piano player, my hands go to chord shapes first so when I write tunes on the piano, they have built in chords that go with them. But if I write tunes on the accordion, or if I write tunes by singing them in the car, they often come with no chords at all. What's that like? How does your brain work?

**Owen Morrison**

They always have chords for me and maybe that's because I'm an accompanist and I think chordally. I write because, to me, the melody is not complete without harmony beneath it. And, like, go back to the key of C, a C note sounds totally different if you're playing a C chord, a I chord, than it does if you're playing just an F chord. Then that C sounds really good over both chords but it doesn't sound like the same note to me or at least it has a completely different use in the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Its context is totally different.

**Owen Morrison**

That's a good way of putting it, that the chord or the bass provides the context for what the note is and that's what gives it tension or what's the opposite of tension?

**Julie Vallimont**

So, I mean, it's not resolution.

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah, it can either feel relaxed, or it can feel like it's on edge and it's not the note, it's where the note is within it. It's sonic space. I always write with harmony. I've probably written a few tunes on the guitar that I wasn't thinking about the harmony, but not much.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do your tunes end up coming out like any particular style, do your influences come out in your tunes? Do you feel like oh, I'm definitely drawing on this kind of old time background or my classical background or are they just like a fusion of whatever's in your brain?

**Owen Morrison**

Yes, some of it's just a fusion, but definitely I've drawn, styles, whether it's a genre of music, like you said, or sometimes I think of a single person, say [Rodney Miller](https://www.rodneymiller.net/) was someone that I'd listened to a lot growing up, and then got to play with for a bunch of years. He just has such a distinctive style of fiddling that I think I've probably copied him as much as anyone in my melodic playing for contra dancing as much or more than other guitar players. I think about the way that someone plays in composing a fiddle tune. I think if comes to waltzes, I'm probably thinking about a composer, maybe. I can't write anything that sounds actually like Brahms or Chopin, but I've certainly based some of my pieces, not really based them on, but listen to a bunch of Brahms or a bunch of Chopin and then written a waltz that to me feels like it's in that vein, even though it doesn't sound that way to anyone else. But that's where I felt like it came from.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those things percolating around in your brain and the chordal language and the...I'm letting Owen finish is last sip of beer here....

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah it's totally empty now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Good job...well I don't have to talk any more. The rest of the interview's on you!

**Owen Morrison**

We could go off the record for a second while I get another...

**Julie Vallimont**

We can! If you wanna pause and get a beer you can totally do it.

**Owen Morrison**

Alright, we'll be back after these messages,

**Julie Vallimont**

Stay tuned! [hums Jeopardy theme music]

**Julie Vallimont**

Okay, so here's a rhythm player question. When you are playing guitar for a dance, what kind of things are going through your head? Like what's your job so to speak or your role?

**Owen Morrison**

I'm thinking about the mood that we're setting for the dance or for the dancers. Do I want them to feel energized and bouncy? Or do I want them to feel like they're just kind of gliding along across the dance floor. It's amazing how the way that you play rhythm and the harmony that you provide, actually, like propels people in different ways it makes them want to move up or it makes them want to move forward or if you do it badly, it can make them want to just drag their feet and not dance at all, but that's what I'm thinking of primarily.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you work with a caller? Do you look at the card or they just tell you kind of what they want?

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah, some callers like to just give you adjectives, descriptors of what they're thinking, some like to give you the card, and I'm happy to work with that. But a lot of times, I don't think it really matters, you just have to be confident and go with the thing that you want. And in many dances, not every dance maybe, but many dances can work four or five different ways very well. So you could play many different styles in the same dance would would work well as long as you own it and you do it all out and really commit to the feeling and the sound that you're going for.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, if you commit then they'll go there with you unless it's like a failing idea, you don't want to commit to everything. I remember, oh, gosh, we were playing and we switched tunes and I just had a total brain space. I just switched to the wrong key. I knew what the tune was, but I thought the tune was in G and it was really in D or something. I just completely botched the transition playing the wrong chord and I came in on this huge like, two octaves, both hands piano in totally the wrong key. It was so bad. So you know what I did, I just kept doing it. And everybody's looking at me, like my bandmates not the dancers, they didn't really notice. But my bandmates are like, what are you doing? And I'm like, I have to keep doing this long enough until it seems convincing, like I meant to do it. If you do anything bad long enough, it builds up this tension that is then satisfying when you resolve it, even if it's not good in the first place.

**Owen Morrison**

I think that's especially true with contra dance music. And it might be true in most parts of life, actually. Confidence really goes a long way. And if you pretend like you meant to do something, then you did, as long as you're intentional about where you go afterwards. I took a jazz theory class at UNCG when I was in college, and my teacher there told me, any note, in any situation, is okay, it could be the right note. So, no matter what note, no matter what chord can work, it just matters how you justify that note with the next thing you play. So that's kind of a cool way to look at it. Anything you play could work as long as you turn it into a line that makes sense or something musical.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's profound. I remember after being an accompanist for a while I would start to fall into patterns of like, I always accompany this tune the same way because of it's obvious chord changes and stuff. After you do something for a while, I personally grew to love when I would make mistakes, like just my fingers would slip. It's hot and sweaty and tired and whatever, we're playing fast. I would play totally this other thing I wasn't expecting. I actually learned to look for those things and try to do them again right away so I could figure out what it was that I had done because I don't always know what I've done. Sometimes those are my favorite moments, that can turn into a really cool thing.

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah, I can't think of the last time that happened. But I believe it.

**Julie Vallimont**

You have far better technique than I do probably.

**Owen Morrison**

No, I make mistakes. I'm just thinking of the mistakes that have actually turned into something I wanted to do again rather than just repeating. Sometimes you might repeat it the next time through the tune just to make it sound like you meant to do it. But beyond that, would I want to do it the next dance, maybe. I can't think of the last time it happened. That did happen, there's a tune that Elixir plays called Abe's Retreat or something where the horns all play, I think it's just whole steps away from each other and big long notes. It sounds like a train whistle and that did happen by mistake. I think it was a transposing issue, playing a tune in A on an instrument and B flat or something. The note didn't come out right the first time and then everyone was just playing this tone cluster. That is definitely something that then became the arrangement. The only way we do it now is with the train sound, the tone clusters.

**Julie Vallimont**

I know exactly, as soon as you said that it came back into my mind and that is such a great feeling.

**Owen Morrison**

So you're right, that definitely happens, where the mistake becomes the only way to do it, the right way.

**Julie Vallimont**

You just have to be open, open to your mistakes in the moment.

**Owen Morrison**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you think about tempo much when you're accompanying?

**Owen Morrison**

Yes, I think about tempo a lot. I was raised to believe very strongly that changing tempo is the worst thing you could do as a dance musician. I don't actually believe that anymore. But, I mostly play by that rule. I think I tend to like tempos that are slightly slower than what many bands do now, although faster than what most bands did a couple of decades ago. I think contra dance music in general has sped up. I think the caller kind of gets what they want as far as tempo goes, but I'm definitely paying attention to it a lot. I like people that can play the same tempo all the time even if we decide to choose to speed up or slow down. It's really fun to play with people who, it's not a constant tension of trying to lock in the right tempo.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, because if you're kind of tugging on the tempo, then you can't naturally lock in and makes it hard to improvise. That part of your brain is busy, you can't just relax. Where do your tempos tend to fall?

**Owen Morrison**

That's a good question. I have a little Beat-o-Meter that tells me how fast we're playing that every now and then I'll turn on on stage just out of curiosity to see if we're going up and down and see where we're playing. I think my happy place for dances is probably 110 to 118 [bpm] and on occasion, I certainly go faster than that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It seems pretty moderate.

**Owen Morrison**

I think 114 is just, I love playing French Canadian tunes. I think those are my favorite tunes to play, and probably to dance to, as well at least for for contra dancing. And 114, 116 is a very happy place for me to play French Canadian tunes and others.

**Julie Vallimont**

Kind of a playful tempo.

**Owen Morrison**

I do think that tempos need to follow the dance, the tempo needs to be right for the dance and some dances need to go faster, and some needs to go slower. I know many musicians that think like, well, this tune goes this fast, many old time musicians, but also Irish musicians and other players, like this tune really needs to be this fast and that could be slower or faster. Whereas, I don't care what tune I'm playing, I'm happy to play whatever tune at a fast tempo or a slow tempo, it needs to be right for the dance. I talked to an accordion player who was like, Irish tunes just don't want to go faster than 112. I don't want to play these tunes. Of course, that's not true for everyone but it's a style and he's a very good player. He wants to play those tunes slower but there's many dancers that need to go faster than that. I do think that the music needs to accommodate the dance rather than the other way around.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you grow up playing many New England tunes, like chestnuts? Did those things kind of percolate down to where you were?

**Owen Morrison**

Definitely. I was so exposed to music in New England as well, not just Virginia music. So probably old time music was what I heard the most at home but I spent multiple weeks a year at Pinewoods or other places like that. Yeah, I was very familiar with New England music especially.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, because some parts of the country, I feel like these tunes don't always make it out there. Or if they do, they're played in their own style, which is kind of cool. It's just interesting too, and I think it's interesting how things spread and where they end up.

**Owen Morrison**

In lots of parts of the country old time music is kind of the main genre for contra dances, because that's the pool of musicians who are playing trad music, and are able to play for contra dances. Some people love dancing to old time music and some people really don't like it. Not all old time music is the same, of course. So it's hard to really make a judgment one way or the other. I love it and I think it can make great dance music. I also like to do it with dynamics rather than just kind of the zen way of playing old time where it can be fun to do, from a musical standpoint, as a participant or anything, but for playing for dancing, I'd rather do it a little more dynamically with changes in energy rather than just a slow buzz.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love doing that too, it's like a roller coaster in a way or like riding a wave or something. I think it matches the dancer's energy levels. It's like, first they're learning the dance, then you can turn it up a little bit, and then you let them glide a little bit. And then at the end, it's like, squeezing all their energy out like a sponge the last couple times through.

**Owen Morrison**

That's a good way to describe it. I don't think you're describing it that way but I should note that it's not the tempo we're talking about. It's just the energy level. The tempo can stay the same while you're doing all those things with the energy and the emotion of the piece.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's intensity, in fact, sometimes slowing down very slightly can make things seem more intense, it like stretches them out in this really interesting way. It's good practice to play different volumes to a metronome. It's like the louder I get the more the metronome is dragging, and I don't understand why.

**Owen Morrison**

Because you're speeding up as you're playing louder?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, absolutely. We all speed up when we play louder. I'm curious, I didn't grow up in the contra scene like you did, and you've been a part of it for so long. It's like literally in your family and you married into a contra or traditional dance music family.

**Owen Morrison**

That's right. You know how bad it gets, my parents met through dance, I think in New York first, and then they became a couple at Pinewoods in 1971. I met my wife at Pinewoods, and well, we were teenagers. It took a few years before we decided we wanted to get married. We went to college and had lives before that. But it's true. My wife's great uncle was a friend of my grandmother, my mom's mom and told her to go to Pinewoods in the 60s. That's how come my family started going. So there's a lot of incestuousness in the dance community and just a lot of history in both our families going back there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Deep roots with the Morrisons and the Langstaffs. There are many other families like that, how many bands have started from meeting at Pinewoods and being on crew together, bands like yourselves and like Anadama and lots of other bands. How many children have been born because of Pinewoods?

**Owen Morrison**

Yeah, a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you have one.

**Owen Morrison**

Another one on the way. I don't know if you know that, due in March. [The baby was just born in late March!]

**Julie Vallimont**

Congratulations! Wow.

**Owen Morrison**

So there's two.

**Julie Vallimont**

Nothing else to do during the pandemic, you might as well have another kid.

**Owen Morrison**

[With the first baby] I think I had to cancel, I had to get subs for three or four dance weekends last time and this time I get to go on paternity leave and I won't miss any gigs.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, there's a silver lining. Have you been working on different musical things since you've been at home more? It's a very different rhythm not constantly being touring all the time and meeting up with other musicians and bands and rehearsals and stuff.

**Owen Morrison**

I've gone through little spurts of actual productivity, and then long times not getting much done and not practicing much. Because you're right, I get inspired by being around other people and by playing with other people. Part of it is just that we never leave the house and my wife's working from home and my one year old is around and there's just not that much time to really focus on music, but that's enough excuses. I have had a few spurts of composing a bunch and even a few spurts of real practice, although they've been shorter. I think I've written a couple of tunes that I like, as much as anything I've ever written. So that's good, that I was able to get that in to this year off of touring and playing out.

**Julie Vallimont**

This is a question I've been asking everybody lately. It's always an awkward question. Not awkward, but just, stilted or something. Do you ever worry about what traditional is when you're writing new tunes or when you're playing? Do you think about yourself in that context? Do you worry about it at all?

**Owen Morrison**

I don't worry about it. I know there's so many people that do worry about it that I don't have to worry about it. I'm not interested in being traditional, even though I love traditional music. I often play things more traditionally than many other bands or musicians are doing. I'm not consciously trying to keep up a tradition. I love so many different kinds of music from so many different places that especially when I'm writing music, I'm gonna let them blend together and let what I like the most come out, rather than trying to fit it within a specific genre. And so that's how I come to it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, but then you can kind of add those new sounds to the tradition, which I think is cool.

**Owen Morrison**

It's great that we can do it, with contra dance music all you really need is the right number of beats, right? You need a good tempo, the right number of beats and a good groove, and we don't have to play fiddle tunes at all. We don't have to play any of the music that is traditional, or that has been done to this dancing, because you can do it to any kind of music you can imagine that's a good tempo, and has the right number of measures. So I don't know, maybe in that sense, I am a traditionalist because I love fiddle tunes. I really love traditional music from the US and Europe and other places. But with contra dance music we can bring in any influence we want, of course, and people are doing it. Sometimes I think that's really awesome and sometimes I think, oh, gosh, I wouldn't do that. I mean, some people are thinking I wouldn't do that about the things that I'm playing, I'm sure. So, it's good that we we can have that freedom.

**Julie Vallimont**

And there is that thing of like, you don't have to worry about being traditional, if enough other people are, whatever that means. There's the center of the bell curve, that's kind of traditional and there's enough going on there that you can do interesting things on the fringes of it and not feel like you're affecting it too much.

**Owen Morrison**

At the same time, I think it's harder to...I forget why it was but Eva Cassidy came up, who is a really great singer from the Washington DC area. She died very young, I think at 33 years old in the 90s. She was known in the Washington DC area as a great singer, but she wasn't known worldwide. And then, for some reason, she became very famous shortly after her death and is now considered one of the great singers of her generation. I believe, this is my belief about her.

**Julie Vallimont**

What is traditional, being on the edge of the bell curve?

**Owen Morrison**

I don't know why I brought her up anymore. You know what we can strike that from the record? What was your question that got me to the her?

**Julie Vallimont**

I said some gibberish about the bell curve and enough people keeping things to the center that we can do things on the fringes.

**Owen Morrison**

I had a really good anecdote that that was the lead into, but I have no idea.

**Julie Vallimont**

If it comes back...

**Owen Morrison**

If it comes back we'll go there again.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was she traditional?

**Owen Morrison**

She was like a chameleon, she could sing anything really well, kind of like Rhiannon, Giddens, she can sing opera, and she can sing gospel, and she can sing whatever she wants. Eva Cassidy was that way, and it made it hard to market. She didn't sign with a label because she didn't pin herself down to, I'm an R&B singer, or whatever it is. I think if you're a contra dance musician, say, who's using all these different influences, and loves to play Irish music and loves to play old time music and loves to play klezmer music or whatever it is, you can't then be put into a bin, so if you market it further in the, in the music business world, you kind of need to focus on one thing. Irish music is a is a major genre and bluegrass is a major genre and there's other traditional music forms that have become their own thing. People that really focus on those things do very well, or, I don't know, the very best of those people do well and make names for themselves. And there's a big fan base in that world, where it's like, people that are just mixing and matching everything, people just don't know where to put them and it's hard to to go very far in the music business as far as concerts and festivals and record sales go. Does that make sense? I think that's why I brought up Eva Cassidy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's kind of interesting because that's the most common aesthetic for contra dance music right now. Our tradition is combining traditions, it's an interesting place for it to be. There is a sound of what we consider New England traditional contra music, like albums that Great Meadow is putting out and Bob McQuillen or whatever. But most modern contra dance music is just us combining a bunch of influences, and tunes from all over the place.

**Owen Morrison**

I think that's true with almost every band that's playing contra dance weekends right now. You're right. And so they're the perfect thing for contra dance weekends, and they're not marketable in any other musical set.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. They're like, hardly even definable. So then what defines it is like, what makes something sound like contra dance music, it's the energy and the tempo and that very squared up 32 bar, feel and the groove. It's really the groove, it has to be a groove that you can walk to.

**Owen Morrison**

That's true, but a lot of different grooves fit that bill,

**Julie Vallimont**

So then, is it just tempo? What is the defining thing that all these things have in common?

**Owen Morrison**

I think, say you have a caller that doesn't stop calling. I think you could do a contra dance to just say foot percussion, or you could say a metronome, but foot percussion is a little more interesting than a metronome, not a lot, but foot percussion, and then whatever you want, ambient music, just a tonal soundscape and a caller and foot percussion. That would make a contra dance that some people would absolutely love.

**Julie Vallimont**

Will you release that as an album, please? I would really love to hear your version of that. We don't want to dance to that, right? I'm cringing at the thought of it.

**Owen Morrison**

I don't want to dance to it, I don't want to play it. But that's all you would need. Right? What if that soundscape also had some rhythms that came and went that were actually good, nice grooves, that actually might be something people would want to dance to.

**Julie Vallimont**

Maybe.

**Owen Morrison**

If you take it down to its very essence and you take out the traditional quality, like we know what traditional contra dance music is. I don't think you need that many parts to actually work as dance music, and maybe even be good dance music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Would you like dance music without tunes in it?

**Owen Morrison**

I don't think so. But I don't know that. I don't think so. Certainly people go to dance clubs where there isn't a lot of tunefulness.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's a different kind of dancing.

**Owen Morrison**

It's a different kind of dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's not phrased, and you're not trying to do it all together. It's not structured. Even when I was doing techno contra, I've experimented with doing it with and without tunes, and we found ourselves missing the tune.

**Owen Morrison**

I would miss it.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of bands play at times without the tune. That's not scandalous at all. You could play two or three times without a tune, five times without a tune, play a riff. But if you did a whole dance without something melodic that was filling that niche. Like the "not-a-tune" is fun, because it's in the context of there being a tune some of the time. That's what makes it fun when you take the tune out, right?

**Owen Morrison**

I agree with that. Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

So I don't know, if in 250 years, if contra dancing is still a thing, what if there were no tunes, what would that even be like?

**Owen Morrison**

Here's what I'll say. Many people who I admire who played contra dance music or still play contra dance music, when I first started playing don't really care for the changes that have happened in the last few decades in contra music, and they might feel like we've already taken out the tunes. Maybe those of us that are playing now in a more kind of disparate, there's just way more influences now in current contra dance music, and way more things that are acceptable and considered okay. Maybe in a few more decades, we are going to feel like oh my god, they've taken out the essence of what I liked about this music. Almost definitely that's going to happen, because that's what happens as things evolve, right?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, most of the time, or you crystallize it into something that becomes rigid and will eventually fall out of favor because it can't respond to what people want in the moment.

**Owen Morrison**

So that's a happy note to end on. One of those two things will happen.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's an interesting question, right? The music has to stay relevant to people. It's interesting to think that it hadn't occurred to me that we've already taken the tunes out, in a sense. The tunes are almost optional. They're not completely optional. But we do a lot more with them certainly. I'm sure there's a lot of people, especially from older generations of dancing and music, that don't like that sound or that feel.

**Owen Morrison**

Totally. I still prefer to dance to happy French Canadian reels, I can dance to all night long. I still prefer that.

**Julie Vallimont**

All night long, all night, it's the best. I do think that contra dancing is inherently a trancy activity, because you're repeating the same sequence of figures over and over again, in geometric, like, altogether and that can be very trancy. Repeating a tune over and over again, can be very trancy. I feel like sometimes we undermine the power that tunes have by feeling we have to do all these things to them. And sometimes just let the tune do what it is and be what it is. It can be amazing.

**Owen Morrison**

I agree, and yet, we're gonna keep doing things to it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because we get bored and restless and want to try new things and also bands have to get hired for dance weekends and need a way to be different and you know, everything.

**Owen Morrison**

Yep, all those things are true.

**Julie Vallimont**

All those things are true. That's an interesting note to leave things on. Dystopian contra future.

**Owen Morrison**

Maybe it's the dystopian contra present, depending.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, I could see tunes becoming more popular again in the future. Maybe the pendulum isn't gonna swing too much farther away from tunes and then maybe we'll go back to it.

**Owen Morrison**

But then will it become too rigid? Only time will tell.

**Julie Vallimont**

Only time will tell. When your children are adults, and maybe they're playing for contra dances, they can have these conversations. And you'll be the fuddy duddy dad who drags them along to dance weekends.

**Owen Morrison**

I hope so.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is there anything else you want to talk about while we're talking today?

**Owen Morrison**

No, I think that was a great conversation. Thank you, Julie, for leading us through that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It was fun. I just enjoy sitting here watching you drink a beer. It's also like the most social interaction I've had in a long time.

**Owen Morrison**

I really believe that Zoom beers or FaceTime beers or whatever it is, like it's important.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, here's a big cheers to everyone out there in Contra Pulse land. Keep the faith.

**Owen Morrison**

I hope to see you all. Not too soon. But you know, this year would be nice.

**Julie Vallimont**

Some way or form? Absolutely. Well, thank you Owen, this has been so much fun. I appreciate it.

**Owen Morrison**

Thanks for asking me to do this Julie.