Contra Pulse Episode 27 – Betsy Branch

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra Pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This episode I talk with Pacific Northwest Fiddler and singer Betsy Branch. Betsy is a versatile musician who loves to explore multiple genres of music. She got her start at age five in classical music, and then in her 20s fell in love with folk fiddle music. She has wandered her musical way through music from Ireland, Scotland, Appalachia, Quebec, Sweden, England, Bulgaria, and New England, just to mention a few. She plays regularly for contra and English country dances from small ensembles to the Portland Megaband, and at times you can find her playing and singing in a local pub. she'll try almost anything, and loves to collaborate with a wide variety of musicians. Betsy's main work is teaching fiddle and helping both kids and adults find joy in the instrument and with music. In summers she teaches around the country, including an annual teaching gig in the mountains of North Carolina at the John C. Campbell folk school. And for the next few summers she will be program director of CDSS's is Harmony of Song & Dance week at Pinewoods Camp. Since 2006, Betsy has been the associate music director for Portland Oregon's Revels company, and she has had the opportunity to work with some amazing musicians along the way. She has also had the opportunity to arrange choral music and overtures for brass quintet. Betsy is also a music transcriber and editor. She recently finished work on a large book project with legendary Irish Fiddler Kevin Burke. Additionally, she is the music editor for the Portland Collection - a series of contra dance tune books. In our conversation, we explore her path from Suzuki violin to square dances at the Tractor Tavern to playing chestnuts at midnight in Montague Massachusetts. Betsy shares why she loves playing dance music, her philosophy and choosing tunes and we talk about her longtime collaboration with David Kaynor. We also swap stories of memorable onstage moments and favorite band games to play while the caller teaches the dance. I find her enthusiasm and love for these traditions infectious hope you enjoy!

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hello, Betsy Branch and welcome to Contra Pulse. I'm so happy to have you here.

**Betsy Branch**

Thank you, Julie. I'm very happy to do this with you.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's so great to see you. I'm so happy. It's been so long. It must have been last summer that I saw you.

**Betsy Branch**

It was summer 2019 at [Pinewoods](https://www.pinewoods.org/).

**Julie Vallimont**

Harmony week. Harmony 2019. What year is it now? It's 2021. I don't know what month it is or anything.

**Betsy Branch**

Well, my friend Andy Davis just calls everyday blursday.

**Julie Vallimont**

So that's a good one.

**Betsy Branch**

It's Blursday, every day, every year. So it doesn't matter what month or year. I use that a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

And for those who are listening later, this is the one year anniversary of the shutdown of everything from the pandemic. So it's been a year since most of us have done dancing or really any sort or playing.

**Betsy Branch**

Today is one year since my husband and I flew to Chile, southern Chile to go visit our son, and we barely made it out of the country and we barely made it back into the country. So that's an interesting anniversary for me too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, a lot of us have memories of whatever we happened to be doing when the pandemic started or at least when it got real enough to like, really affect our daily lives. You know, we all kind of knew it was coming for a week or two. I was in Hawaii last March. George Marshall does a Hawaii dance camp and Noah and I were booked to play it.

**Betsy Branch**

I remember you being there.

**Julie Vallimont**

So surreal time and a lot of us were like, oh, we better go home now because they're shutting down the flights. It's been a year of not dancing for people and that's like a thing worth knowing.

**Betsy Branch**

Yeah, a thing worth commemorating right now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. That was the word I was looking for.

**Betsy Branch**

Not jamming together, not having their bands together, there's such a huge loss. I've been thinking a lot about how different things feel right now than they did exactly a year ago. A year ago it was all about everything shutting down, doors slamming closed. And now it feels much more like things are starting to creak open just a little bit.

**Julie Vallimont**

You're out on the west coast and you mentioned that your daffodils are blooming.

**Betsy Branch**

I can see right out my window. We've got a bunch of daffodils blooming, and today is about 60 degrees. In fact, after our interview, I'm gonna play some Irish tunes in my backyard with some of my neighbors.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm jealous. Here in Vermont, we did have an unseasonably warm day yesterday, but it's cold again, and everything's frozen again. I kind of was thinking today, I feel like that this dance culture and music culture is sort of also like the trees in the winter, and all the leaves fall off, but the roots and the trunks are still there. And they're just waiting until the right time to come out. And right now the sap is running. Even in the middle of winter, the signs of springs are still there. I feel like that's what's going to happen with dancing. We don't know yet if it'll be possible this summer, but next summer, maybe or in three years, maybe or for some of us five years. Who knows but the roots run deep and all these roots that we have created together are still there. So speaking of roots, I know you through dance and music, we must have met at Pinewoods. One of the years we were on staff together.

**Betsy Branch**

Yes, we did. I think you were running sound. That was when I first got to know you and then we had fun staying up late and playing music into the wee hours.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's the best thing in the world. That to me is the point of camp, if I had to pick one reason to go to camp is to play tunes at 3am. Everyone has their reason. This is mine.

**Betsy Branch**

That's the year we sort of co-wrote that tune with Noah.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right. It was pub night. Yeah. Leaving MacIntyre. They were singing that song where everybody shouts MacIntyre! And we were like, do you want to go somewhere more quiet?

**Betsy Branch**

Let's just go play some nice, peaceful, late night tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

We were there with [Adam Broome](https://maivish.com/bios/adam-broome/) and [Jaige Trudel](https://maivish.com/bios/jaige-trudel/). Adam was like, do you want to write a tune? And so we wrote this tune together, fun memory. Wow. I feel like we go back so far.

**Betsy Branch**

We might have come across each other at a camp or something, when you were in Portland, I feel like that's when I got to know you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. We also know that these kinds of relationships we might feel like we go back far, but it's not in chronological years. It's like a concentrated intensity of connection and you can bond with people really fast.

**Betsy Branch**

It relates to what you said about the deep roots of this tradition. When you meet somebody else who is into that, that bond is really quick, I think.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's wonderful. So this is going to be really fun. Because while I've played tunes with you and had fun with you and seen you at camp, I don't know anything about your life, Betsy.

**Betsy Branch**

That's because I'm from faraway, mysterious Portland, Oregon, you know.

**Julie Vallimont**

So I'm gonna get to ask you all sorts of questions and we'll all learn about you together.

**Betsy Branch**

Great.

**Julie Vallimont**

So how did you get started playing the fiddle? How did our paths cross? How did you end up playing for contra dances and other kinds of dancing?

**Betsy Branch**

It's amazing I got there at all because I never heard of contra dancing growing up. I'm not one of those people who was surrounded by this community of contra dancers. I wasn't one of those kids who just was steeped in it. I grew up in suburban Denver. I studied Suzuki method starting at five and just learned classical violin growing up. I chose it, I wanted to learn the violin, I just saw someone playing it and I liked it and so I chose it. I feel like I never found my heart music until I heard fiddle music. I just wasn't exposed to it until I was in my 20s in a way that made me...I had heard it, of course, but it was always this other thing that other people did. The way I got into fiddle is kind of funny and it'll be somewhat edited here. I was living in Seattle and weirdly enough, my parents, who are from Denver, went on some raft trip with a friend of theirs in the Northwest. The raft guide was somebody who was into traditional music. And they got to talking and they're like, oh, our daughter plays music, you know. And of course, they were trying to set me up with anybody they could find. But anyway, I ended up having dinner and playing some tunes with him and he was just like, hey, come on down to where there's these open band jams down at the tractor tavern. So I started going to the [Tractor Tavern](http://www.tractortavern.com/) in Seattle. All of a sudden, I was like, this is it, I love this music. And people would just show up, there were always a couple people leading the tunes. And then just whoever wanted to show up and play could show up and play and I didn't know any tunes at all, but I just kept coming back. And then I'd be like, Oh, they did this one last week. I just slowly gradually learned these tunes over time. I was in graduate school at the time. I taught English as a non-native language for a while so I was getting my master's degree to teach that. But instead of studying, I got really obsessed with fiddle music. I still managed to get through school fine, but I spent a lot of hours listening to recordings and learning tunes. I had a part time job at a violin shop. So, when I first started, I only learned Irish tunes and it's because this guy that I worked with at the violin shop was an old time fiddler. He was very, very strict about...you have to choose, if you want to play Irish music, play Irish music, if you want to play old time music, play old time music. I didn't know anything. It's like, okay, so I chose Irish music, because there was something about that, that immediately grabbed me. I liked everything I heard. But when I went to the Tractor Tavern I was playing all kinds of random stuff. But when I studied on my own, I just soaked up Irish tunes, like crazy. That's what I was going for. So that's kind of how I got started in all this. And then I started meeting people. Someone asked me to join this great, this sort of large band in Seattle called the Fat Chance Dance Band, which people in Seattle will be like, oh, yeah, I played in that. It was just like one of those bands that everybody's played in at some point or another. There were like, seven of us in the band or something at the time and so I learned a bunch of tunes there too. And then I started a smaller band from that. That was with Anita Anderson and Terry Wergeland. We had a little band based out of Seattle for a while. When I moved from Seattle, I moved to the Bay Area and then I moved to Portland after that. So the great thing that happened when I moved to the Bay Area is I started playing with Bobby Nicholas on fiddle and [Paul Kotapish](https://guitarfish.net/) played guitar with us. We were figuring out what tunes we knew and they kept suggesting old time tunes. Hey, do you know this tune? And I was like, no, well, how about this one? No. And finally, I told them that my friend at the violin shop had told me I had to choose Irish or old time. And they were like, "What? That's crazy." So then they sat down, and they taught me like ten old time tunes. That was really fun, because it opened up all these doors. I was like, I don't have to choose. I've been kind of a sampler of styles ever since, maybe to my musical detriment, but it sure is fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you can play French Canadian tunes, you can play old time tunes, Irish tunes, New England tunes.

**Betsy Branch**

I usually get to them by meeting somebody who loves to play that kind of tune. So, you know, that's just kind of how it...how all these things opened up. When I was in Seattle, I also started encountering [David Kaynor](http://davidkaynor.com/), who would come out to Seattle several times a year and do workshops and play dances and do all this stuff. I went to some of his workshops, and I started hearing all these great classic New England tunes and I did learn a bunch of those then. As David and I continued playing in later years, and then did our duet album I just wanted to hold on to those great New England tunes from him and also Swedish and Quebecois. David, he's also a sampler, he'll play anything.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Betsy Branch**

Paul and Bobby gave me the old time thing and then living in Portland, is really where I got super into Quebec music. Part of that really got kick started when [Lisa Ornstein](http://www.lisaornstein.com/) moved here and all of a sudden, everyone was playing Quebec music, it's really fun. So I learned a whole bunch of tunes and played with Lisa some of the time and so it's all about who I meet and what we end up playing together.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's amazing. For our listeners, Lisa is a pretty well known fiddler musicologist who lived in Quebec for quite a while and it's a treasure trove of tunes and history and stories.

**Betsy Branch**

She moved from way northern remote Maine to what felt to her like this massive metropolis of Portland, Oregon, and she's just like, it's so big and now lives in Olympia, Washington which is a little more right size for Lisa. For me. It's all about when I play with somebody, if they love a certain kind of music, I kind of fall in love with that music too, just by playing with that person, I guess is how I would describe it, so it's a fun pathway.

**Julie Vallimont**

So many things we could talk about just for that, we could talk about Irish music and [Kevin Burke](http://www.kevinburke.com/). We could talk about your record with David, we could talk about your contra playing. Where do we even start? This is so great.

**Betsy Branch**

Yeah, it's all been fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Why don't we start with your Irish playing. You were playing Irish music before you started playing for contra dances.

**Betsy Branch**

Yes. I was learning a bunch of Irish tunes while learning contra tunes at the Tractor Tavern. So technically, at the Tractor Tavern, I was playing for contra dances. But it was like this giant open band. I didn't really know what I was doing so I was never the lead. I guess I kind of did those at the same time.

**Julie Vallimont**

So talking about Irish music, recently, you've been working on this [book project with Kevin Burke](https://fiddlefrau.com/kevin-burke-book-project/).

**Betsy Branch**

It's done.

**Julie Vallimont**

Congratulations.

**Betsy Branch**

It all started by getting to know Kevin, because he lives in Portland. The way I got to know him was one of my former students went and took lessons from him and then she got to be friends with him. In fact, the same one who is coming over to play Irish tunes with me in the backyard. But she got to know him and then he said, hey, I want my son to get some fiddle lessons, do you know someone? And she said, yeah, Betsy Branch could teach him. He had his wife get in touch with me and set up lessons for his son, Michael Burke. And so, Michael came to his first lesson, and he said, well, I don't really want to play the fiddle, but my dad's making me. I was like, oh, this is great. He ended up playing piano and kind of going on his own way. But we had a great time, actually. I was kind of like, wow, that was my first introduction to Kevin Burke, and I was kind of like, why are you making your kid learn fiddle, that seems weird if he doesn't want to do it. So Kevin told me later, Michael's final lesson, Kevin brought him, and we ended up talking for 45 minutes after the lesson like Kevin does. He told me that when he was a kid he used to try and not practice. He didn't like his teacher very much, because she used to wrap him on the knuckles with her bow. And she was kind of a mean teacher. He told me about hiding his bow under the rug in his living room, so that he wouldn't have to practice. This is when he was like nine or something and then, of course, somebody stepped on the bow and it broke and he got in trouble. So his thought was that maybe if his son had a nice teacher and had an introduction, maybe he would end up liking it. He just wanted to at least give it a try. So we gave it a try for like six months and so that's how I got to know Kevin. And then I hired him to do a [Portland Revels](https://portlandrevels.org/) show because we were doing an Irish show so I hired him for that. And then we played together and got to know each other musically, that way. And then at some point he would give me free tickets to shows which is always really fun. And then, at some point, he was like, hey, are you good at like reading music and stuff I said yeah and so he gave me a draft of this book that he did with [Cal Scott](http://www.calscottmusic.com/Home.html) back when they were playing together. He said, well, just give it a once over and you just see how the bowings, look or if you say anything weird and and so I looked at it and I started finding all these mistakes, and I found over 100 errors. And they were really close to going to print and so I called him up I'm like ummmmm. So doing that kind of eventually led to me doing this book that I did with him. After I asked him the question, does it matter that the way that you wrote the tune out doesn't actually match how you played it ever on the album? And he said, no, I don't care, because he just wanted to get the book out and move on. But that stuck with him and so later he called me up and he said, hey, I've been kind of wanting to do a book and I wonder if you would be able to transcribe it. And insanely I said, sure. It's really hard to say no to Kevin, he's kind of a force of nature. You just want to say yes to him, because he's such a likable person. So I said yes and then, about eight years later, we finally got the book out.

**Julie Vallimont**

How many tunes are in it?

**Betsy Branch**

112, and it's four of his solo albums. About two thirds of the book includes his bowings, that's the part that just took me forever. The whole book has ornamentation and bowings, I think I did a pretty good job. But I'm doing it from recordings, and there is a lot of guesswork there. I'm sure there's some stuff in there, but he looked it over. One of my favorite stories is this one tune I sent him and he said he looked at it and he kind of scoffed, he was like, yeah, now, this is not how I bowed this turn at all. And then he was like, in fact, I'm just gonna play it right now. He played it and as he was playing, he was like, Oh, god, that's exactly how I bow this tune. So from then on, he didn't ask too many questions. That was nice.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who are some of your other Irish music influences when you were learning to play this music?

**Betsy Branch**

Well, living in Seattle. When I worked at the violin shop, I remember this one day this guy came in to try out bows and he started playing and I was like, who is that?

**Julie Vallimont**

Betty's jaw just dropped, for the listener, her jaw just dropped.

**Betsy Branch**

I was blown away, it was so beautiful I asked my old time fiddle friend there, who is that? And he said, oh, that's [Dale Russ](https://pegheadnation.com/string-school/instructors/dale-russ). So Dale Russ would come into the shop now and then try out fiddles or bows. I talked to him and he said, oh, well, come see my band. He played in this band called the Suffering Gaels. They used to play down at the [Conor Byrne pub](http://www.conorbyrnepub.com/), which is right across the street actually, from the Tractor Tavern. This is like where it all happened, Conor Byrne, Tractor Tavern, right across the road in the Ballard neighborhood of Seattle. I would go down to Conor Byrne, Conor Byrne who owned it, he was in the Suffering Gaels and so they're kind of house band there. But he also got in great musicians. At the time, I was living in Seattle, also [Martin Hayes](http://www.martinhayes.com/) lived there. He would show up down at Conor Byrne some time, he was also putting out his own solo stuff at the time. And so doing a lot of touring and concerts locally. Those were some of my Irish influences up there. I had this neighbor who had a bunch of Irish recordings that I just basically listened to. A lot of those were Kevin Burke recordings too. So those are some of my big, early Irish influences. Just because that's who I managed to run into.

**Julie Vallimont**

How do you think being an Irish style fiddler...I know you play many things, but like the Irish part of your background, how does that affect your dance playing? How do you use that when you're playing for dances?

**Betsy Branch**

That's a really good question. I almost feel like you'd have to ask somebody who listened to me play to answer that question because it's really hard to know that from inside my own head. I know it shows up, and probably in ornamentation. There's probably somebody hearing me play old time might be like, hmmmm. When I did Revels, we did a Scandinavian year and I hired these two great Swedish fiddlers. And they kind of like, yeah, you play this tune, like an Irish player. And it showed up in my bowing, the way I did my bowing, so that was kind of interesting. They taught me how to do bowing more in a traditional Swedish style, just what I would avoid in Irish tunes. So I guess that's one answer, it shows up in the bow, shows up in the left hand too. If I play old time, I try not to do Irish ornaments. But, you know, I'm sure they show up.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's the thing, everything kind of flows into everything else. Especially when you're playing for dances, you don't necessarily have to try to have that pure identity, just be whatever you are.

**Betsy Branch**

This is why I like playing for dances, it feels very free, nobody's watching me too closely. Playing the online dances have has not been very satisfying for me. I finally just said, I just psychologically almost can't do that. When I play for a live dance, it leaves me energized and like, I'm part of this entire room full of musicians, and all the dancers are musicians, and I'm a musician and we're all doing this thing together. When I did the couple of dances on the Zoom sort of thing, I would leave feeling drained and exhausted, and a little depressed. I thought, I know that people need a lifeline right now but I just couldn't provide that, it was really, really hard for me. Because when I'm playing in a room of people that just fills me with so much joy and energy. And so that the online stuff was the exact opposite. I don't mind playing, doing a concert or something like this online, that's fine. But the dance thing, I just couldn't after a while and I felt a little guilty about that. Because I know that people, they're just looking for a way to connect with people. So to anyone who wondered why I said no to you, when you asked me to do your dances, I was trying to take care of myself through this.

**Betsy Branch**

Yes. And my favorite thing, and you're one of the musicians I can do this with, it's just so lovely. When you're playing with somebody who you can tell is really listening to you. And then you do something and then they know, oh, she's really listening to me. And then there's that magic connection, it's super exciting. I love those moments. That's one of my favorite things when I play for dances, is when you realize they just completely responded to this thing that I just did and then you respond back and then they look at you and you're like, yeah! Amazing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, absolutely and it is about that connection. I feel like it's not dance music, if nobody's dancing. Even like when we could all dance and stuff, just having band rehearsals, we'd be in a room together, coming up with ideas, but the ideas are always different than the things we would think of spontaneously when there's a hall full of dancers there, it's just different. You get different kinds of ideas, or more ideas, they just come like, we could try to work together and work up an idea. But playing for dances, the ideas just come spontaneously, my hands would just go to these places, I'm like, oh, you're gonna do that, cool, it's that magic feedback loop.

**Julie Vallimont**

You also mentioned your album that you made with David Kaynor, your duo fiddle album, [Midnight in Montague](http://www.davidkaynor.com/Midnight%20in%20Montague.html), which is lovely. How did that come about? We'll probably play some of that during this podcast, maybe after this section so that people can hear some of the music. There's one moment where the the bell chimes in Montague, like it does every hour. I don't know how those people who live there can put up with it every hour, 24 hours a day. It's very loud.

**Betsy Branch**

Every fifteen minutes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Every fifteen minutes! Do you have to record around it?

**Betsy Branch**

Was it every 30 minutes? It felt incessant. I feel like it bonged once on the quarter hours, and then it bongs the hours. I could be remembering that wrong. It might have just been on the half hour. So here's how it came about. If you go back to [Folklife Festival](https://www.nwfolklife.org/) in Seattle, David was always around for Folklife Festival. There was one year where they had put him, they often had a Fiddler's showcase and they gave David a slot in the Fiddler's showcase. We were playing near the beginning of the festival. And he's like, I'm doing this fiddler's showcase tomorrow but I don't really want to do it alone. Do you want to do it with me? I was like, sure. So we went in, and we did it as a twin fiddle thing. And it was just really fun and it felt really natural and we both just had a blast. and it felt easy. David's always been a really easy person for me to play with and vice versa. We just play together well. So after we were done, I said you know what we should do, we should do a recording with only fiddles. No backup, just fiddles, two fiddles. That's all we need. He was like, "Okay." I can't remember if we did it that very summer, or if we waited a year. It was either that summer right after the Folklife, or it was a year later.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you rehearse a lot? How did you pick the tunes? There's some English tunes on there and there's some New England tunes, all sorts of things. How did that process work?

**Betsy Branch**

I just went out there for a week. I stayed in the guest bedroom at the apartment where the guest bed is about two inches away from the church tower that bongs 24 hours a day. I just felt like it was ringing inside my head. If you talk to people who stayed in that room, they will be like, oh, yeah, I stayed in that room. [Sue Songer](https://www.theportlandcollection.com/editors/) got to where she would take noise cancelling headphones anytime she went there just so she could sleep. Anyway, so I went out there for a week. At the beginning of the week, we just played, we would play and then we would brainstorm and say, hey, what would be a nice English thing to do? I'm like, well, how about this, let's play that and then we play a few things. And then we'd just settle in on something like, oh, let's do that, that would be lovely. There were certain things we always wanted to do like Jamie Allen and Sunday River Waltz. Those were kind of always on the list just because we always end up playing those together. The other stuff just kind of happened organically over the week. We would kind of choose music and then we go into the Grange Hall across the road from him and set up the little digital Zoom recorder things. David had one and I had one, we used David's for the CD and we used mine for the church bells. That was where mine factored in, but we set up his on a little table in the Grange Hall and nobody else was using it that week so we could just kind of leave it set up. We would go in during the day but whenever we went in during the day, there'd be traffic driving by or some dude on a riding lawnmower. There was one day, I swear he was mowing his lawn for like three hours. It's like, really? We couldn't record with that going on. And so we ended up recording a lot late at night, and in the middle of the night and with the church chimes we would just wait, we'd have to wait for the decay, you know the bell to decay and then we'd have like 14 minutes to do the next set before before the little bong would come. We'd just have to time it and there were several takes where we had to throw it out because the bell turned up, so we got pretty good at watching the time. And then one of the nights at like two in the morning, we're playing, and in all seriousness, it's the night they decided to paint the little yellow lines in the middle of the road, right outside the Grange Hall. Outside the Grange Hall, there's this little triangle shaped, mini square thing. It's not a square if it's a triangle, but anyway, it went, like, very slowly all the way around. It's like, grrrrrrrrr you could hear the paint spraying and we're just sitting there going, are you kidding me? We had a finite time, because I had a plane to get home. So amazingly, we managed to get the whole thing recorded, in spite of all of that. We decided then that the church bells had better be a part of the thing. Then we ended up naming the album after that. We went out at midnight one night, and it was this beautiful night, and I just put on my recorder. You can hear the crickets and then you hear the 12 chimes, and then we let the whole thing decay. David managed to mix it in so that the crickets start at the end of Sunday River Waltz. It's a lovely fun way to end the album.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's beautiful.

**Betsy Branch**

It totally fit with the whole project. For both me and David, that's like one of the favorite musical projects I've ever done. I'm so happy with the result, it's not at all polished, and fixed up and mastered. It's just us playing tunes in the Grange Hall, no frills.

**Julie Vallimont**

You could feel the connection between you and just tell that you're having a good time and at the heart, that's what good music is and you're playing good tunes.

**Betsy Branch**

Yeah, they're great tunes but there's nothing fancy about them, they're just great tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

They have nothing to prove to anybody.

**Betsy Branch**

Right. And there's nothing wrong with tunes like that. It's really fun to play some like intricate, crazy tunes sometimes, but sometimes it's great just to play Jamie Allen, it's all you need, really.

**Julie Vallimont**

These tunes have stood the test of time for a reason. They lend themselves really well to the style of playing that David likes to do and you. Like the double fiddle thing, harmonizing, switching back and forth. Did you ever like, work it out? Or do you just play together and then kind of feel out who's going to take it and switch back and forth?

**Betsy Branch**

Pretty much very organic, we just switched. Some of it, we would work out like, we had a few arrangements, like, hey, how about David, you start this one alone and then I'll join in on the B part, and then we'll both play melody the second time and then let's see what happens. So you know, there would be really loose arranging like that. But none of it was totally scripted. A lot of moments where we just did whatever felt right in the moment. We would do a lot of eyebrows, like, he would go like that, move his head towards me and that would be you take the melody. So that we would know, or I would do that to him and then he would know he should take the melody. So in the moment communication, without saying, "you take it!" in the middle of the album.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, that's also a very contra musician thing to do. We all have codes that we use on stage to try to talk to each other.

**Betsy Branch**

It's always funny when you're at a Pinewoods kind of thing or something and you're playing with somebody you've never played with and the thing they do that's so obvious to them, you have no idea they're trying to tell you. Those are funny moments. The dancers...usually you don't notice when you've practically train wrecked.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember once we were playing with a new caller, who was doing like the open mic callers series. We were in the middle of a tune and he's sort of patting his head when you pat the top of your head and that means from the top.

**Betsy Branch**

Right, this is the top of the dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

We're like, ah, okay, so we looked at him like are you sure? He starts patting his head again. I'm like, okay, we're in the wrong place, so we'll start to the top of the tune. So we yelled, A1, we go to A1, he's like, no, no, no. He's looking at us all flustered. So now we're off from the dance, trying to get back on and we're like, where's the top? It turns out afterwards, we finally fix it, end of the dance. We all laughed about it. But it turns out afterwards, he was trying to tell us, one more time. He was using the patting his head to mean one more time through instead of giving us like a one finger. Like, oh, the secret code. You always have to talk with the caller beforehand, talk with your other bandmates, decide what your systems will be, make sure they all mean the same thing to everybody.

**Betsy Branch**

Right. He probably was watching [Rick Mohr](https://rickmohr.net/) or someone sometime and saw him do that, like, oh, that's a thing to do.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's another time when we're calling and the callers they do that thing where you like, pull your finger across your throat? It means like sudden death, like, stop immediately.

**Betsy Branch**

Unless you're playing a square dance and then you go to the end of the phrase in a square dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, exactly, you have to know what it means. We were just playing and he did the thing to us. You know, he pulls his finger across his neck. And we're like, really? And he does it again and so we just stopped. And he's like, what did you do that for? He's like, oh, I thought this was just the last time, I want you to stop when the tune's over. I'm like, oh, my friend, that's what the zero fingers fist is for or you stick out your foot. It's just really funny. That's one of my favorite things. Honestly, I think of it like solving a puzzle, like a logic puzzle, figuring out how to communicate to each other on stage during a contra dance.

**Betsy Branch**

And when it fails it's kind of hilarious. It's very memorable. And the dancers definitely notice then, they're like, the band stopped playing, why? Yeah, it's very funny. Those are those great moments.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's always my job to give the potatoes. Once for no reason I gave two potatoes instead of four. I do not know why. I just did two and then I started playing the tune, and everybody else is looking at me like, what's going on over there? We all have these little brain fart moments just to help the callers feel better. We all do random things. Or we've had moments where we all agree on a tune, but then someone forgets what key the tune is in. And so you start after the potatoes, playing the same tune in two different keys. That's a really great sound, highly recommended.

**Betsy Branch**

I've done the...where you, I'm absolutely 100% sure that this tune I'm playing is whatever we said. And then everybody's looking at me like, what are you playing? And I realize it's in the same key, but it's a completely wrong tune and then it takes me a while to scramble and get back on the right tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

I feel like fiddlers have to do this thing, you know, melody players, but especially fiddlers I feel like have a reputation for having this database of tunes in your heads, and being able to pull them out, but they get mixed up with each other all the time.

**Betsy Branch**

This is why, when I started playing dances, it seemed like in Seattle and the Bay and Portland the thing was three tune medleys, right? I'm way too lazy for that, I usually prefer two or even one, it just requires a lot less brainpower and what I also like about it is I like to play a tune for a while, so that I can really sink into it. It's not that I have to do anything inventive with it, but I can sink deeply into it and feel it in my bones and start to really feel how this tune goes with this dance. Sometimes you just sink so deep, you're like nope, we're not going to switch because this is too good. I have more fun doing that rather than the incessant switch, switch, switch, switch switch. If we're talking about jam sessions, if you go to an Irish session, they're switching like every three or four is considered a lot of times to play a tune, like woooo, doing four. In a contra dance jam, you can just like jam on a tune for as long as you want and nobody cares. I also prefer that as a jam thing. I like Irish jams because they definitely keep your brain active and on your toes, but it's sort of like a brain aerobics class. Sometimes I'm just like, ahhhh, that's too much. Here's one of my favorite moments we had a long time ago, when we first bought this house in Portland, we had a jam session, and we just invited a whole bunch of people over. It ended up being this time when [Jere and Greg Canote](https://folkworks.org/canote-brothers/) were in town from Seattle. So they were in town and on their way to our house, they heard this tune that they loved. They were with Charlie Hartness in the car. They heard this tune that they absolutely loved. They pulled up and then they all sat in the car, listening to the tune enough that they could learn it. I was watching them, like, why are they just sitting in the car, eventually, I went out and checked, and they're like, oh, we're learning this great tune we heard on the way here and so they eventually learned it and then they still wanted to play it. There were all these northern musicians in the front room, doing jam, switch, jam, switch, jam switch. They went to the backyard and they kept playing that tune and then they kept playing that tune. I think they kept going for three hours, playing the same tune. Meanwhile, inside, we're like playing all these jigs and reels and waltzes and turning through these tunes, and Jere and Greg and Charlie are in the backyard. They played that same tune all night. Whenever I talk to them about they're like, oh, I still love that tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

What tune was it, do you know?

**Betsy Branch**

I don't know, they know, you could email them and then you could say, okay, I found out what that tune was, but it was such a great contrast to like, old time, sort of like, we're just gonna play this tune into the ground, to more like, we're gonna play a whole bunch of tunes and switch and do as many tunes as we possibly can on one night, and it was just like, all happening at the same party. It was great.

**Julie Vallimont**

If you did the Cape Breton thing, they play a tune twice, and then they switch.

**Betsy Branch**

And they're not easy tunes. So if you're trying to pick them up on the fly, forget it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Just bring your recorder and watch and tap your feet.

**Betsy Branch**

That's why I like the contra jams. Because, by the end of the rounds, I actually can play the tune. That's very satisfying.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a great story. Well, I think there's a magic to playing a tune a bunch of times. You know, I feel like the best tunes are designed for repetition. [Dudley Laufman](http://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/dudley-laufman/) would say if it's worth playing once, it's worth playing 100 times and I don't remember, to Contra Pulse listeners, if I've told this anecdote before. That's a hard time with being the interviewer, is that you all have to hear me every session. If I told this story before, I apologize.

**Betsy Branch**

You haven't told me.

**Julie Vallimont**

No. So you get to hear Betsy's hearing this story for the first time. I think we were actually at Harmony week at Pinewoods and [Pascal Gemme](http://pascalgemme.com/) was there, fiddler from Quebec. Many of you know him from the band Genticorum. I was learning some tunes on the accordion that I had accompanied on piano for years, but I never knew what all the notes were. And so he was like, What do you want to play? And he's like, how about we play Le Voyage, and I'm like, whoa, that's a four part really notey tune. I don't know what all the notes are. And he's like, It's okay, I'll be patient. He's so cheerful and we played that tune for 10 minutes. I still didn't have every little note here and there and I was like, Pascal, is this getting boring for you, you're being so patient. I'm gonna go off and learn it by myself. I'll come back and then we can play it together. He's like, no, no, no, this is great. He said, what he likes to do, is he just sits on his porch, and he'll pick a tune and play the same tune for half an hour on his porch.

**Betsy Branch**

That's fantastic.

**Julie Vallimont**

How many of us do that? It's like, then you get to know the tune. He's like, this is only 10 minutes. This is nothing, we're not even a third of the way through of playing this tune yet. This tune's not done, it's just beginning.

**Betsy Branch**

Well, and in that situation, he's not just playing the tune. He's playing it with you and he's watching you develop a relationship with it. There's something really special about that, seeing somebody taking a tune that you know, and taking it on themselves. That's one thing I love about teaching as you see that happening, it's fascinating to watch. So yeah, totally. I love that.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's all sorts of rewards out there for those of us who are patient and I was not patient, but he was.

**Betsy Branch**

One thing I do if I end up in a session where maybe they're playing the tunes really slowly, I'm in the [Portland Megaband](http://www.portlandmegaband.com/), which is a pretty hilarious thing, actually. I don't know when this podcast is going out but we did a giant video project this year with Mega Band, so we're actually gonna air it on March 27.

**Julie Vallimont**

It'll be out by the time this comes out. Will it be archived to rewatch?

**Betsy Branch**

Yeah, we're gonna put it up on YouTube. So you can search Portland Megaband on YouTube and find it and it will be [this giant video project](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2i1e5nqvJXU&t=367s) that whoooo, that was a lot of work. We're still working on it, actually. In the Mega Band, in the early on rehearsals, we're doing these tunes, and we're playing them pretty slowly. They're great dance tunes, but you know, it's pretty slow. So anytime I end up in a situation like that, where it's like, okay, I already know this tune and we're playing kind of slow, I could be like, oh, I'm so bored, right? But what I do instead is I take it as this opportunity to really hone in and practice technique. I'll play little games with myself. I'll say, alright, I'm gonna see if I can hardly at all lift my fingers while I'm doing this, and how still can I hold my fingers. I'll just start experimenting with bowing and going, okay, I'm going to try some crazy bowing, nobody can hear me in a setting like that. It doesn't really matter. And then I can do these posture things, and I can experiment with my breathing. Anytime I'm in a situation like that there is so much you can do with your own playing and hone in on technique stuff. Finger efficiency is a huge thing on fiddle so there's so much fun you can have with that. I love that.

**Julie Vallimont**

What kinds of things do you like to do during dances, when you've played the same tune a million times, and you're going crazy.

**Betsy Branch**

I don't really go crazy, unless I'm just exhausted. And I'm just like, I want to stop because I'm just tired. If the caller lets it go on a little too long and you're like, oh, my gosh. I like to watch the dancers, I'll sometimes find a dancer who's a really good dancer. And maybe as you can see that that dancer is really responding to the music and then I try and make that dancer do things, like they're a puppet and I'm the puppeteer. So it's like, okay, I'm gonna try and get them to really, really get into this and so I might do something. That's kind of a fun game to play. Another fun game I like to play at dances is, you know how melody players will trade phrases with each other. So, I'll play two measures and then another one in the band will play two phrases in response. If I'm the only melody player, if it's just me and Mark or something playing...Mark is my piano playing husband, by the way. So if we're just playing, I'll trade twos with myself, or I'll trade fours with myself. I'll do some doodle doodle doodle and then I'll answer it in a really different style as though I'm a different person. It's really fun, actually.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you'll trade fours or eights or whatever with yourself?

**Betsy Branch**

With myself, so that's a really good dance game to do.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's really funny.

**Betsy Branch**

Oh, and here's a fun game, if you're working with a caller who takes a really long time to teach. I was playing once with Dan and Fran. Dan Compton and Fran Lafleur. And the caller was, that happens sometimes the caller takes a really long time and then it goes wrong, and then they have to start over. We created fiddle tune charades, and I'm sure this has been done before. But it was really fun actually, there's so many great fiddle tunes that you can guess pretty quickly. One of the ones we did was okay, we held up 10 fingers for that’s how many words are in the title. So first you'd play a fiddle tune and go okay, fiddle tune, and then you just hold up 10 fingers, then you just think, oh "Shove that Pig's Foot a Little Further into the Fire."

**Julie Vallimont**

Does that have ten words? I can't count that fast.

**Betsy Branch**

Well, I mean, we had to get there, but you just think, okay, what's a stupidly long tune name, "Shove that Pig's Foot a Little Longer into the Fire." I almost counted "in" and "to" as two. So yeah, it's a great game if you're ever stuck at a dance and you need something to do that won't be too distracting.

**Julie Vallimont**

You have to be careful, right? I admit, Betsy, I have also played fiddle tune charades onstage. We used to do it in Nor'easter if one of us, like say I picked the tunes, and we're waiting for the caller to do the walk through and I would act it out. You have to act it out before it started to play the potatoes or else something's gonna happen.

**Betsy Branch**

Right. Oh, that's great.

**Julie Vallimont**

If you don't guess it then you have to sit out and until you guess what it is.

**Betsy Branch**

Wow. Ours was very low stakes fiddle tune charades. We just were doing it because we were bored. But we had already picked the set we were going to play.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, I see, you already know what the tune is?

**Betsy Branch**

Yeah, we're just randomly doing that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I see, rather than you won't know what tune we're playing until you guess it. You can get away with that with a trio though as long as two of you know what the tune is, then you can play the game to the third or subsequent people.

**Betsy Branch**

Or you just go okay, I think those potatoes were in G. Just play something in G. Let's see what happens.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that is a fun game.

**Betsy Branch**

Next time we're at a dance we're gonna do that we're going to do fiddle tune charades but in your harsh way where you don't know what the tune is, unless you figure it out.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's kind of exhilarating. The thrill of danger! It's the most fun we contra musicians get to have. We've all done this thing where we play with kind of pickup bands for a contra dance, where it's just random people that you know from the scene, but you don't practice or know what tunes you have in common. Maybe people bring tune lists, maybe not. We took turns picking a tune, but it had to go progressively down the letters of the alphabet. I would pick an A tune, the next person would pick a tune that started with a B, C, D. There's all these ways. So like, X is really hard. I could not think of a tune that started with the letter X.

**Betsy Branch**

Well, did you write one? You have to write one.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I guess you do. Maybe that should be it. If you can't think of one you have to write one.

**Betsy Branch**

You have to compose it on the spot and people have to learn it in time for the potatoes.

**Julie Vallimont**

So dancers, if you're ever looking at the musicians up on stage, wondering what intellectual erudite conversations we're having up there it could be any number of things.

**Betsy Branch**

Absolutely. Always very intellectual I assure you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Always intellectual.

**Betsy Branch**

Yeah, it's way fun. Do you ever get the dancer saying, oh, I'm so sorry you don't get a dance. I'm like, no, I'm right where I want to be. I love playing for dances. I like dancing, dancing is fun. But if I had to choose, I always choose playing. So don't worry about me. I'm happy, you're happy. We're all doing what we want to do.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's true. You can always dance later when you're not playing.

**Betsy Branch**

Exactly, I love playing for dances. It's super fun. I miss it a lot actually.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who are the people you play with these days, most of the time, or did before this?

**Betsy Branch**

So currently, my main contra dance band is with my husband, Mark Douglas on piano and then our good friend [Bill Tomczak](https://billtomczak.com/) on clarinet and saxophone and sometimes percussion. So that's a fun little trio, it's really fun. We have a good time playing around with music and exploring, talk about that active listening. We don't really rehearse, we just play and then see what happens and we all really enjoy that. I mean, we do rehearse but it's not like we plan. We just sort of pick tunes that we want to play and then we play them and then we get to a dance and we see what happens.

**Julie Vallimont**

New Englanders know Bill from his much time spent playing dances in New England.

**Betsy Branch**

Absolutely, like with Yankee Ingenuity way back and with [Latter Day Lizards](https://latterdaylizards.com/) for a long time. He lived in New England for 25 years back in the day, and now is in Portland. I'm also in an English band with Bill actually. So my other band is at English country dance band called [Fine Companions](https://finecompanions.com/) and that has a great piano player named Lisa Scott. She's done a lot of Scottish country dance music, and has a classical background too. She's a beautiful, beautiful English country dance player. Eric Weberg, who a lot of people know as a caller, he's also a great flute player. He plays in the band, Joyride, also. So that's a really nice quartet for English country dance. During the pandemic, when it was warm enough we would get together and play in Eric's backyard and that was delightful. His neighbors would like, clap and come out and sit on their porch and listen to us and it's very sweet. So that's really nice, those are my two main bands. And then of course, the Portland Megaband, which has about 75 people in it and usually we play for a giant 500 person dance every March. But not last March, not this March. We'll get back there, though. My other big project that I do is the Christmas Revels, which I'm one of the music directors for that. So I end up forming bands for shows and so I get to collaborate with these amazing musicians. This year, I had 11 people in my band, because we did an online show. I hired people to do one of those video band things. All people that I'd hired and, and chose in the past. It was just this great combo of people and we had a clog, or a banjo and a bunch of fiddles and whistle and guitar and bass. It was great, fun. Harp. That's one of my other big musical projects. It's not contra dance, but I get to meet a lot of great local musicians that way too, which I love.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's one of the fun things about Revels is that it pulls in music and dance from a lot of different traditions. Knowing your way around a few traditions is really helpful for that and singing, because you also do some singing.

**Betsy Branch**

Exactly, I like anything really. The singing actually, I started doing more when I had a baby and started singing lullabies to Scotty when he was a baby and that kind of got me my singing voice back. I had never thought of myself as a singer and then I was like, well, why not? I started teaching early childhood music classes and little kids liked my singing. So it's like, okay, why not? If you need to learn how to sing, sing for little children, because they will love you. They don't care if you're not that great and then you can get better and they won't even notice so it's a super non judgmental audience. So that's my advice, if you want to learn how to sing.

**Julie Vallimont**

I feel like even for adults, when I'm drawn to a singer, it's often like the spirit or the emotional content behind what they're singing not the technical quality of their voice. If you can win over toddlers, you can win over adults. It's sort of like, who you are and how that comes across in your music matters to me way more than how perfect your technique is. It's funny because I'm also one of those people who won't sing in public. I don't think of myself as a singer. So it's this funny dichotomy. We all put these weird pressures on ourselves of who and what we're supposed to be a quote musician.

**Betsy Branch**

Absolutely. When I watch people play, or sing, I just try and think what do I like? If I see somebody who's very impressive, that doesn't mean that it fills my soul. I can see somebody who's maybe not a super impressive player, but something about how they play really reaches deep. That's the kind of musician I want to be. I want to be a musician that maybe doesn't have perfect technique all the time, but can reach in and l'll say something like what is the song or what does this tune say to you today, and it's different for everybody. I figure as long as the tune or song is saying something to me, it'll say something to somebody else. I went through my stage where I wanted to play all the hard, difficult dark minor tunes, just because I could, but then I was like, I don't want to play, those are a lot of work. I just want to play lovely tunes, and whatever the dance, whatever will serve the dance in that moment. Maybe it's a really driving awesome tune. Maybe it's a lyrical, beautiful thing. Maybe it's something kind of fun and whimsical, like Pointe-au-Pic or just like those great dance tunes. I don't want to be impressive, that doesn't interest me anymore.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's funny. I think that's not evolution, but a series of phases for a lot of people where you start by learning simple tunes, because you have to. Then you play really complicated show offy tunes, because they're fun and exciting and new.

**Betsy Branch**

Because you can.

**Julie Vallimont**

They also force you to learn and they're cool, and they're fun!

**Betsy Branch**

Right! It's true. There's nothing wrong with those.

**Julie Vallimont**

No, absolutely not. But then after a while, a lot of people find themselves settling back to these simpler tunes. You know, I certainly did.

**Betsy Branch**

Absolutely. And then you realize how deep that tune always was and that there really is no such thing as just a dead simple tune. A tune that's been around for hundreds of years is going to have a lot of depth to it, I think.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, odds are. How about "Little Burnt Potato"? Where's the depth in "Little Burnt Potato"? I argue there's a lot of depth to "Little Burnt Potato."

**Betsy Branch**

Absolutely. I think any tune, you can make it the right tune for that moment. When I, when I've worked with David Kaynor, as a caller, the band will be like what kind of tune do you want? You're wanting to find the perfect tune for the perfect day, that kind of, oh my gosh, we have to do the right thing. And some callers will get really descriptive and give you all these details and you're trying to pick just the right thing. David will say something like, play something pleasant. If I would say do you want a jig or a reel and he'll say, "Yeah!" You can take a tune that maybe you usually play smooth and lyrical and you can make it bouncy. You can take "Little Burnt Potato," and you can make it smooth and lyrical, it's just like, you can do stuff with a tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Some callers will say things like that, because they don't know the music very well but they trust the band to pick something. David knows everything, David knows all the tunes and he has a database of 500 or 1000 dances in his head and didn't even need cards and yet, he's still like, well, a nice tune.

**Betsy Branch**

Something nice, that'll work, if it's a good dance tune it'll work. And if it's not, we'll make it work.

**Julie Vallimont**

You start playing it and then inevitably, he'll be like, I love this tune, this is a great tune no matter what you pick, which is the most wonderful spirit.

**Betsy Branch**

One of the things I do if I encounter a caller who's a little bit nervous, who maybe doesn't know the band or doesn't trust them or doesn't trust themselves, so one of the things I'll do is, again, one of the little games I play is they'll describe something to me, and now you can tell they're just a little nervous about it and I'll just say, oh, great, I have the perfect tune for that. Meanwhile, I haven't picked anything at all. I just say that to them and inevitably, they will say, you're right, that was a perfect tune with whatever I ended up picking. It's just like don't worry about it, we'll be fine. Just like, you know, you have a dance, you have a roomful of people to manage, go manage them, don't worry about us, we'll be fine.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, it's funny, Betsy, we have similar brains, because I also have done that. They'll say, this is what I want. I'm like, we have the perfect tune for you. What is it? I'm like, I don't know yet but I know we have it and we'll find it. It'll be perfect. Isn't that a reassuring thing to hear as a caller is that the band is just going to come up with the perfect thing or create it out of thin air at the last moment.

**Betsy Branch**

As long as you believe it, and they believe it, it will be. No, I've done that a lot. I'm glad that you do the same thing, that's awesome.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you carry a tune list around with you when you go to dances?

**Betsy Branch**

It depends who I'm playing with. If I'm going to something like Pinewoods, absolutely. Because I have a terrible in-the-moment memory. If somebody says, what do you know, my brain goes completely blank, even though I know thousands of tunes or whatever. I don't know how many tunes I know. I know a lot of tunes. I can't remember a single one of them when somebody asks me that, so I just have a list. I can just look and go, right, okay. Then I can remember tunes that I know. If I'm playing with a band I'll probably have a list of tunes with the band that I am playing with. If I'm playing for an English dance of course, I just show up with music and we do stuff that the caller asks. So it really depends on the context. I like having a list just because I don't always trust my brain to remember, if there's like, suddenly any pressure at all.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, absolutely, you know all these tunes, and then you're on stage, you can't think of any of them, it's just how it is, it's always good to have that backup. What are some of your favorite tunes to play? You mentioned Pointe-au-Pic.

**Betsy Branch**

Oh, I love Pointe-au-Pic it's so fun. One that I keep playing, I kind of keep just wanting to play during this pandemic is a great Irish jig "Rose in the Heather". Something so lovely about that tune. The other night, I was teaching a music theory class online and I played it. One thing I love about it is that the A part is almost completely pentatonic, you just get this really open flowy feel like where it feels like you can do anything with this tune. And then the B part has a little more shape to it and kind of pulls out of that a little bit. I don't know, I just love that tune. I've been drawn to that one a lot lately. One of my go to tunes, for whatever reason is "North Carolina Breakdown."

**Julie Vallimont**

That was in [the Portland Collections](https://www.theportlandcollection.com/).

**Betsy Branch**

Yeah, fantastic tune. You know, some of the classics, Mark and I tomorrow are going to lead a online jam for a local event. Some of the tunes I was writing down for that were just great old tunes like "Rock the Cradle Joe" or "Sandy Boys," or "High Reel" or "Reel St. Antoine," just ones that a lot of people know. So right now, I feel like I want to play tunes that a lot of people know because people have been missing those tunes. If we're not in this situation, we're like, oh, I'm so sick of hearing that tune, I've heard it way too much. It's like, oh my gosh, that's a tune I used to hear all the time and I haven't heard it in a year now. I'm finding myself craving those kinds of tunes, in a way right now.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like missing friends. I miss these tunes, I'm smiling, like my face hurts from smiling so much listening to you talk about all these tunes because the sound of a bunch of people kinda all out of tune and playing one of these great tunes together, like "Reel St. Antoine." I miss it.

**Betsy Branch**

Just going for it with Reel St. Antoine!

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, somebody on the pennywhistle in the back.

**Betsy Branch**

That's great, there's a beautiful thing about that. So those are the kind of tunes I feel that are rising to the top right now. But again, I like anything.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's one of the things I love about [Maine Fiddle Camp](https://www.mainefiddlecamp.org/). Have you been to Fiddle Camp before?

**Betsy Branch**

No.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's lovely and "Road to Boston" is kind of like the unofficial official tune, or the official unofficial tune. The end of every week, there's a parade throughout camp and everyone plays "Road to Boston", with so much gusto and enthusiasm, and it's just [sings tune].. it's just so wonderful. Those are the tunes I miss the most. Those kind of tunes.

**Betsy Branch**

So most summers, again not last or this summer, although we've done online classes, I've taught at [John C. Campbell Folk School](http://www.folkschool.org/) for the contra dance musicians week. That is so much fun, because we end up the whole week just teaching our students these great standard tunes. And then every day at lunch, we gather around and as the other folk school community people are coming in to lunch, the whole dance musicians class is sitting there playing all these great old super familiar tune and it's so wonderful. I love the folk school for that. Because nobody cares that this is this tune that's been around forever. It's just like let's play "Spotted Pony", I love "Spotted Pony", it's just like, yeah, it's a great tune. Those are the kind of tunes we play for the whole week at John C. Campbell and I love it there. The other thing I love about John C. Campbell, is that we play a community dance every night. It feels to me that those dances are the way that I wish contra dancing always was where it's just like, people are just so happy to be in the room dancing with each other, that they don't care if it's just the dippiest dance in the world, they are just so happy to be there. There's no sense of like, well, that's a boring dance, or that's not a very interesting dance, I'm not swinging enough or, it's just like, they're just so happy to be there and they're seeing their friends. They're encountering their community members along the line and they just are happy to see each other. That's it. David Kaynor has often been the caller there and he'll sometimes call the same dances the next night that he just called the night before and nobody even cares. It's just like, no big deal. It's like the most fun they've had all year, they all look forward to this week, where they get a dance every night. I hope when we come back to dancing, that some of that sense of just the joy of being in a room together dancing, the fact that we get to be in a room together dancing is enough. Not what kind of dances are they? Or are they interesting enough, but just here we are together dancing. And that's a thing of beauty to celebrate right there. So I think maybe that's how I'll come back to dancing after this pandemic.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sure hope so.

**Betsy Branch**

I'll just throw that out there because boy there's something so heartwarming about those dances at the folk school, just all the joy on people's faces when you see somebody who's new to contra dancing, and they're just like bouncing around, and they have that giant grin on their face. That's how everybody is at the folk school. It's so awesome, just makes me so happy.

**Julie Vallimont**

That sounds like heaven.

**Betsy Branch**

We'll get back there. I think we're going to do an online Folk School class this summer that should be actually really fun as pretty much as many people as want to can sign up. So look it up if you want to come join us, we're going to teach some great classes.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, that is one of the cool opportunities of all this is the chance, maybe you can't make it to something in person. Like for example, there are a million camps that all happen between Christmas and New Years and you can only pick one or zero for some people. Now they often have an online presence and you can check them out, like Maine Fiddle Camp has been doing virtual Maine Fiddle Camps and it's not the same, but it's something and you can try out these things that you've never been able to make it to.

**Betsy Branch**

Exactly, and I've done some of that this year. So it's sort of like, might as well do what you can, while it's here.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you're playing fiddle for dances, what are the kinds of things that are going through your head in terms of your role as a fiddler in playing for the dancers, things like tempo and phrasing and that mood and those kinds of things?

**Betsy Branch**

I guess the main thing is, I really just like to watch the dancers and make sure that, is the tempo that I'm doing good for them? Is this working for them? Or do they look like they're plodding? Or do they look like they're scrambling around with terrified looks on their faces, and then adjusting accordingly, so that kind of thing. I feel like I'm a facilitator, more than a performer, as a dance musician. So my job as a dance musician is to make it easy for them to dance, they shouldn't have to work at dancing to what I'm playing. What I'm playing should make it easier for them to do the moves that are being presented to them. I don't want to play stuff that makes them have to think too hard about that. I guess that's the simplest way I would put it. Just really solid, I've danced to bands before where I have no idea where they are in the tune and then you can tell the caller doesn't either. Then you have the room sort of descending into chaos, where the long lines forward and back is like in five different places. It's very interesting, something's gone amiss here. I want to not have something like that happen, I want to be as clear as I can be and as clear as the room needs. Some dancers have more experience and confidence and you get a room like that and you can kind of mess around a little. But if you get a room full of, less experienced dancers, they need a little more obvious cues and that's fine. I find great satisfaction in providing that.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are the kinds of things you think about when you're choosing a tune? Like if the caller tells you what they want? Or if I show you a card? How do you pick the tune that you're gonna play?

**Betsy Branch**

Well, I might think about, what have I just played, and maybe do something a little different like that. I have little figures that I'll look for, if I see if I see tons and tons of balances in a tune, I may choose a really bouncy jig, or I might choose some really like perky Quebecois reel, for example, that's just kind of what springs to my head. If I see something that has a lot of smooth looking stuff, I might choose either a really lyrical tune, or I might do a really driving old time tune, either of those kinds of options can work. You can make any tune work with any dance. Sometimes it's just, I kind of feel like playing this tune now so I'm just going to make it work and I'm going to tell the caller that I have a perfect tune. I just want to play this tune right now so I am going to, like it or not.

**Julie Vallimont**

But honestly, I often have those instincts to when I'm picking tunes, but maybe that's just what the room needs at that moment. Like you have an instinct to play it, it's not just because you like it, it's also because that's what the vibe wants you to. I feel like picking the music is kind of like programming with the energy of the vibe. Wow that was a lot of buzzwords. Programming the energy of the vibe, I don't think that made any actual sense. I just finished this recording project where our word of the day was vibe. And we're just like, oh, this is a vibe, this is a vibe, I'm saying it now oh, no! It's like you've got to feel the vibe of the room and the right tune just pops into your head. We've all been in situations where callers, or we want to program something in advance, especially things like big festivals where it's hard to talk on stage, like main stage at the Flurry, we might program in advance because there's just not time and you want to be polished. But times when we program for regular dances, I often just want to throw the program out because in the moment I'm like, actually, for some reason I feel like playing this and then it ends up being the perfect thing.

**Betsy Branch**

I think it's sort of what has just come before, what do I know is coming after, like sometimes the caller will say I really, really want old time tunes for the third one. So can you do some dippy jigs right before that, actually usually callers never ask for dippy jigs.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sadly.

**Betsy Branch**

Unless they're David Kaynor.

**Julie Vallimont**

And [Sue Rosen](http://suerosencaller.com/).

**Betsy Branch**

Sue Rosen loves dippy jigs, you're right, she does.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's why I love Sue Rosen.

**Betsy Branch**

Sue is awesome. There's a lot of things, partly just like, what just pops in there. There's some tunes that are just, no matter what the dance is, that tune is always going to serve. Marches are great dance tunes, gosh, I love to play marches, there's something about them. One of my favorite workshops I did once was at [Lady of the Lake](https://ladyofthelake.org/) and Jeremy Korr, who's from Los Angeles, was the caller. He wanted to do a workshop where he was going to do the same dance for the whole workshop, but we would play really, really different music. It was really fun just to see how people move their bodies very differently. So when we did some marches, people moved a lot from their shoulders, it's very [sings tune], that kind of move. Then we did stuff that kind of made them move a little more from their hips. There was some that where they, the marches too they did their heads a lot. And you get their hips going and they just would move really differently to the different kinds of tunes we would play. It was a really fun workshop. The dancers liked it, because he told them what we were doing. He told us to observe the dancers, and then tell the dancers what we saw. It's really fun for the dancers too, to be observed by the musicians, and we're just basically playing with them, again, like puppets, ooooh, let's make them do this.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's fun. It's really fun.

**Betsy Branch**

It is. There's just so much to love about playing for dances. That was the thing that felt right. I loved all the orchestra stuff, too. There was stuff about that, that I really loved. But I feel like I found home when I found the contra dance stuff. There was something about that, that felt like finding home. And even though I didn't come to it till I was 24, I still am glad that I was young enough that I could have a nice, long relationship with this kind of music, and grow and have enough time to grow into it even though I didn't get to grow up in it. I think also, that it's helpful for me as a teacher, because I'm always a little envious of the people who have grown up steeped in it. But what I bring to the equation is like, it's okay, you can still do this, even if you haven't grown up in it. It's all right. You're welcome. You can grow, you can still grow into it. Sue Songer is a great example of that, because she didn't even start playing the instrument at all until she was an adult. She's learned to play fiddle because her daughter's teacher, Suzuki teacher, made her learn with her and she was like, oh, okay. And then her daughter quit and she was like, I'm gonna keep playing, I like this. Then she found the contra dance music because she had a contra dance and then she started learning the music. Now look at her, you know? It's great. So it's never too late to come into this. You don't have to have grown up in it and be steeped in it. It's beautiful when you are because there's that depth there I heard, when you were talking to Rodney Miller, I heard him say, "You know, I think I was doing this stuff before I was born." You feel that, and I will never have that in my playing, but that's okay because that just came from a really different pathway.

**Julie Vallimont**

I didn't start playing this music till I was 30. I feel like a good folk tradition is accessible to people, no matter how long they've been doing it, it should have an easy entry point, just like contra dancing should have an easy entry point, you should be able to come in and just get thrown into it and learn how to do it and kind of learn the community and the craft at the same time and feel like the music can be very similar, you know.

**Betsy Branch**

I agree.

**Julie Vallimont**

In fact, it's often kind of rubbed me funny when people say things like okay, when Nor'easter was a new band, people would say this up and coming band of these hot youngsters and I'm like, I'm ten years older than they are. But I was younger in contra years than either of them, like I was the new one. They had both grown up in it, both Max and Cedar. And the same thing playing with Noah, he grew up doing this. So it's like, I'm the old one in chronological years, but I was the youngest in terms of contra years. I feel like if we have workshops instead of for young musicians or callers, although that could be a thing, but we should also have them for newer musicians and callers so that we're not accidentally ruling out people who have come to this later in life and feel like they don't belong with the new people or the established people.

**Betsy Branch**

I like that, that's good.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's great I think we've talked about this in past Contra Pulse episodes, but that when you're tapping into an old tradition, you could just keep learning more and more, you can never reach the end of this tradition. There's always more people to meet and more stories to hear.

**Betsy Branch**

There's no bottom, you just keep going., deeper and deeper in, just like music. It's a beautiful thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

It is a beautiful thing.

**Betsy Branch**

You can take it to whatever level is right for you. You can be a totally recreational sometimes player, or you can really delve deep into it, there's room for all of that. I mean, it's folk music. It's for folks, you know. It's not for, just like this only special really talented, skilled people can do this. That's the beauty of it. It's just like, yeah, pickup, I have a student fiddle student who's 75, she was 75 when she started playing fiddle, and it's like, why not go for it? She started on Irish tunes and that's awesome.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's wonderful. When you switched from playing classical playing to folk music, was that a transition for you to learn how to play by ear? Do you remember what that process was like for you?

**Betsy Branch**

I went to this shop in Seattle and I picked up a bunch of books, like fiddle tune books, and I picked up a bunch of cassette tapes. That's how long ago this was. I picked up some cassette tapes, and I went up to the counter. It was called the Folk Store in Seattle and I went up to the counter, and I asked this guy, I was like, okay, I'm a classical player. and I went to learn fiddle. So what should I buy? Should I buy the stack of books or should I buy the stack of tapes? The Folk Store would have made a lot more money if I bought the books. They were more expensive and he was just like, go put the books back right now. Buy the tapes, and don't look at a book for a very long time. He was ringing up the tapes and he got to one of the tapes, I thought was by the band Open House, which is one of Kevin Burke's bands, it had like [Sandy Silva](https://sandysilvadance.com/) and Paul Kotapish and Mark Graham. He got to that and he was like, oh, that's me, and it was Mark Graham. That's how I met Mark Graham and I told him that many years later, and he was like, wow, I'm so glad I told you that. He said that was a great advice I gave. I said, yes, it was. And he said, you did it, you believed me. I was like, yeah, I totally did that. I only learned by ear for at least a year. I didn't touch a book for fiddle music. That was really important for me to do as a classical player. So eventually, I got to looking at music just because sometimes it was expedient if I needed to sight read at a gig and I knew how to sight read, but by then I had soaked up at least some of the tradition and didn't just play it straight ahead like I saw the dots. Because when you see dots there's no lilt written in. There's no style or variations, it's just a bunch of dots. I'm so grateful to Mark Graham to this day for that advice, that was amazing.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's got to be right up there in like the top pieces of advice to new folks to this tradition is just start doing it by ear as soon as possible.

**Betsy Branch**

And the thing is, it's really painful at first because it's so slow. It would have been so much faster for me to learn a tune by looking at it, except what I discovered is that, when I look at it, I don't really learn it down deep. I just learn it way up here at the top of my head and as soon as I turn away, it just floats out of my head. When I learn it by ear, it goes in deep and it stays. It's like what Pascal Gemme said, you have to get to know the tune you just got to keep doing it. The more you get to know it, the deeper that relationship goes with it and there's no bottom there either, even if a tune like...Little Burnt Potato! There's always more to find. The other thing I love to do in jams where maybe tunes are easier and things are going more slowly as well. One great thing you can do on the fiddle is you can explore the lower octave if the tune is way up here, play it down an octave and all the fingerings are different and suddenly you have to think a lot harder. But then you learn this whole new part of your instrument. I always tell violinists or fiddlers they should definitely try that. I've had people come up to me after a gig and say I really love it when you switch to the viola.

**Julie Vallimont**

You're like, psych!

**Betsy Branch**

I don't own a viola. Sorry, I love violas, but I do not own one.

**Julie Vallimont**

Have you ever played five string fiddle?

**Betsy Branch**

I have, I haven't ever owned one. I also like stringing up one of my fiddles as an octave down fiddle, which is really fun, baritone, fiddle. So that's super fun. So much to say about dance music. We're gonna play a dance again someday, Julie, you and me.

**Julie Vallimont**

That'd be fun. Maybe Pinewoods? Maybe somewhere?

**Betsy Branch**

It'll happen someday, somewhere, somehow.

**Julie Vallimont**

I feel like simultaneously as a community, we're forgetting things and then also not forgetting anything kind of all at the same time. We might be a little rusty, we're very rusty and over time, we lose people who have memories that they carry with them. But on the other hand, it's all still there. And that's the thing I love about playing really old tunes. I remember the first time that someone taught me this tune, I think it's like a Neil Gow tune or when you play some of these English country dance tunes that are from the 1600s. Oh, yeah, this tune was played at a time when people's lives were so different. That's literally been played by generations of people before me. It's sort of like if a tree falls in the woods, and no one hears it, does it make a sound? I feel like tunes don't really exist unless they're being played. So these tunes only stay alive as long as people keep playing them. I just had this moment of feeling like, we're just all conduits, the tunes pass through us and we change them slightly as they pass through us. That's just so cool to think about all the people, like how did this tune get to me and who has played it before me?

**Betsy Branch**

If you think of your image from before of the tree, if the tune is the tree, and the roots go down, then we're the leaves. We play the tune for a while and the leaf falls off and then a new leaf grows.

**Julie Vallimont**

This is very evocative. Betsy is in her music room, it looks like and there's this brilliant blue wall behind her with all sorts of wonderful musical artwork on the wall and so it's very visually inspiring.

**Betsy Branch**

I'll make sure that's my profile picture so people can see what you're talking about.

**Julie Vallimont**

So people can see it. That's great. I'm curious to ask you, for someone who has been in the scene for a while, how have you seen it change over the years that you've been playing for dances?

**Betsy Branch**

That's interesting. Partly that's a regional question for me, because when I started in Seattle, dancing felt really open and welcoming to whoever wanted to come and dance and is the kind of thing that I felt like I could invite new friends to. It was a really welcoming scene there in most of the dances that I participated in. That's such an interesting question. There are a few times when I would go to a dance and as a young woman, I would feel very, very uncomfortable. Because there were situations where there was a very serious shortage of female dancers. Back then there wasn't the idea of gender free dancing nearly as much. One thing I love about more modern dances is that if I walk into a dance now, where there aren't very many women it doesn't matter so much. It's not like this weird vibe. I think that depends on the community. But I love it when it doesn't matter you just find a partner and it doesn't matter who they are. It's not like, oh, well, we have to have these gender balance dance camps and we can only have X many men and X many women. Some dance camps have been crafted like that where like, sorry, we ran out of spaces for women, and only men can apply now. I just love that that is going away, I think that's great. Because as a young woman, learning to dance and walking into a room full of men who wish there were more women there, that was a really uncomfortable feeling sometimes. I don't want any young women to feel that way when they walk into a contra dance. I think that's one of the big changes I've seen I talked about that earlier, that idea of you have to be a good enough dancer, to be at certain events. I understand that people want to play and have fun and do that but I also don't like that new dancers aren't always welcome at a dance. I wish for that to come back, that idea that it's really great when new people show up and this is energizing and we'll keep this going. One of my favorite dance scenes that I've encountered has been at Harmony Camp at Pinewoods, where those evening dances are just so fun. People are just so happy to be there. It's kind of like the John C. Campbell dances. They're all just like everybody's dancing, anybody's dancing with anybody. There's just not that snobbery or this has to be an amazingly, exactly perfect dance. It's just like, hey, let's all dance and have fun. I love that about that week. I've had good experience with both Pinewoods and John C. Campbell for that. I feel like it's still out there but I don't have as much fun playing for the what feels like the dancers almost have to be professional dancers or something. Like, oh, it's just dancing, just have fun. I guess I've seen a couple kinds of changes, some good, some not as good. We'll see what happens after this pandemic, right? I think we're all reprioritizing things a little bit.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, hopefully for the better. Anytime you get a break from something it's good to be intentional about it when you come back to it.

**Betsy Branch**

Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

This isn't a question I've directly asked in this podcast before, but since we're talking about it and we don't have to talk about this if you don't want to. But I'm curious if you feel like your gender as a performer has affected how you play or interact with people in any way. Are you mindful of your gender most of the time when you're playing?

**Betsy Branch**

Not really. I don't feel like I've had to be. I've just found good people to play with and they're fun people to play with, I don't really pay much attention and so I don't feel like I have to either. I'll sometimes make jokes about it if I'm the only female in a large band, or if it's an all women band, we'll be like, yeah! But mostly, it's just like are people fun to play music with and fun to go on long road trips with and fun people if you're stuck on a long car trip to the faraway dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely, good travel buddies, they're the best.

**Betsy Branch**

So I haven't had to think about that as much. Certainly not in the way that I did as a new dancer in a scene that was way more gendered than you would encounter now.

**Julie Vallimont**

I found that it's more subtle sometimes, where there is that funny feeling of like, often being the only female, I was so used to it. I don't think about my gender when I'm playing music. I'm not like "I am playing music as a woman" or whatever.

**Betsy Branch**

I have three older brothers. I just grew up doing stuff with my brothers, I guess I don't think about it as much sometimes.

**Julie Vallimont**

But on the other token, it is nice to have that representation. I find more people are likely to mansplain me about sound.

**Betsy Branch**

I'm sure, as a sound engineer, sure, that makes sense.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, or even when I'm a musician on stage, I've had people assume that I don't know how the sound works. I can't tell if it's because I'm a musician, or because I'm a female musician, you can't...but I often wonder. There's been times when there's something clearly wrong on stage and I'm just quietly watching, try to troubleshoot it. I literally know what the answer is because I can see what's wrong and I'll start to tell them, and then they'll be like, oh, no, it's not that or it's this. And they're like, switch out the cable and like, no, if it were the cable, it would be showing this symptom, and it's not crackling. And they're like, well, it's the DI, I'm like, it's definitely not the DI, things like that. And then they won't listen, I'm like, I could tell you, and they walk away. I just wait five minutes, and then they finally figure it out and it was what I thought it was. It's not that I'm always right. It's just is it that they're not used to collaborating with anybody about those things and that's their personality, or is it that they are discounting what I have to say, for whatever reason, maybe it's just that I'm a musician. But it's hard to have to wonder that, it would be easier if I didn't have to wonder.I also wish that there could be a band of women and it was not a big deal. Why does every band of women have to be a girl's band?

**Betsy Branch**

It's just a band, these are great musicians. You don't say look at this all male band.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, nobody says that. Like, the stories about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, when they're asking her how many women on the Supreme Court is enough and she's like, all of them.

**Betsy Branch**

Yeah, nine.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's another time when she's like, well, also, when you stop asking this question, that is when there's been enough women on the Supreme Court. There's enough women in music when we can stop asking or talking about booking enough women at festivals and making a big deal out of all women bands and things like that.

**Betsy Branch**

Yeah, that's true. I love that answer. How many years have we have nine men on the Supreme Court? So why wouldn't we have nine women? Like why is that a thing? Why should that be a thing? It's not a big deal.

**Julie Vallimont**

Maybe the question is, how many men on the Supreme Court is too many? Maybe we should be asking that question.

**Betsy Branch**

Well, I am about to play Irish tunes in my backyard before the sun goes away so I should probably close up here pretty soon.

**Julie Vallimont**

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

**Betsy Branch**

I feel we covered so many things, it's been really fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

It has been so fun to hang out with you. You're always so inspiring.

**Betsy Branch**

Thank you. I'm really glad you're doing this series. I mean, gosh, nobody's ever asked me to spend two hours talking about contra dance music ever. How cool is that? So thank you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, thank you so much, til next time.

**Betsy Branch**

And take care of yourself and we will see each other down the road in person.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, we will.

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