Contra Pulse Episode 28 – Silvia Miskoe

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello and welcome to Contra Pulse, this is Julie Vallimont. This episode I sit down with accordionist Silvia Miskoe. A New Hampshire native Silvia first learn to dance at age 12 in 1947, and has been playing her accordion for decades ever since college where she began playing for square and contra dancing. Today she plays for contra and also Scottish and English country dance. Sylvia has had a deep and long lasting influence on New Hampshire's traditional music and dance and was granted a governor's Arts Award in 2011 by the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts. She has a long and rich history in contra dancing, playing alongside Ralph Page, Dudley Laufman, Bob McQuillen, and many more, and she performs on the Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra albums as well as several others.

**Julie Vallimont**

As a Scottish country dance musician Silvia was one of the founders of the Strathspey & Real Society of New Hampshire, a group devoted to learning about and playing Scottish music, open to all ages and abilities and she was a music director for seven years. Sylvia's Scottish country dance band, The White Cockade is the oldest band of its type in New England. Sylvia has served on the board of directors for the New Hampshire gathering of the Scottish clans, and is involved in the music at New Hampshire Highland Games. She was one of the traditional artists who represented New Hampshire at the 1999 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and also at the Northwest Folklife Festival. In her travels to Scotland, China, Russia and Canada. Sylvia has been an unofficial New Hampshire ambassador of traditional music and dance, bringing our traditional dance and music to the wider world.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sylvia is also a devoted teacher and served as master artists for two new Hampshire traditional arts apprenticeship grants, passing on the art of Scottish accordion playing. In our conversation over zoom, we discuss the legendary New Hampshire dance scene, where she first began dancing, and eventually cross paths with Dudley Laufman who inspired her to pick up the accordion. We explore her favorite classic New England tunes. Some of the old traditional couple dances that have been disappearing. We compare notes on accordions, and we talk about the heyday of the dance orchestras of Ralph Page and Dudley Laufman. We also enjoy a visit from Sylvia's charming cat, McQuillen. Hope you enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hello, Sylvia Miskoe, welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Thank you.

**Julie Vallimont**

So happy to have you here. It's lovely to see you again. It's been a while.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I know it has.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think I know Sylvia the most personally because we've taught accordion together for the last few years at Maine Fiddle Camp, which has been wonderful. It's always nice to have you at camp sharing your experience and stories and dance knowledge and everything. I'm looking forward to getting to chat with you without anybody interrupting us, which is impossible at camp.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Accordions are heavy instruments and so I always interject chatter so people don't get overtired and lame and sore.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's smart, like when you're teaching a class people need a break from their bellows arm so you tell a story or something. Well why don't we start from the beginning, I would just love to hear how you got started playing music. How did you end up playing the accordion? How did you discover Scottish music and contra dancing? I think that's enough to start with.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

That's a good thing, because I'll have forgotten some of them before we get through. As I said before, my name is Sylvia Miskoe. As a small child, I just loved to dance and my mother would play the piano and I would free dance in the living room. When I was 12 we had a piano come into the house, and I started taking piano lessons and these were very sort of straightforward. John somebody's volumes, one through five. I started with the first volume.

**Julie Vallimont**

So this was in the 40's, is my math correct?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I was born in 1935 and so this was in the 40s. The family was living up in Woodsville because that was where my father's work was. He was clerk of Grafton county court and so we had to live in Grafton County.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is this in New Hampshire?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you've been a lifelong New Hampshire resident?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Almost, I lived in Boston after college for a while, because that's where the music and the dance was. I had a winter in upper Michigan, because my husband was in school out there. That was a real experience, because I had been in Boston in the city and being in South Range, Michigan, which was sort of the tip of the Keweenaw peninsula on Lake Superior, there was absolutely nothing out there. We decided that if we got sick, we would fly home. There was no medicine. We went to the movies twice a week. There was no television.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you play any music while you were there?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I had my accordion and I played a bit and there was a square dance club and they invited me to come. That was fine and so I offered to play because I was beginning to play for dances. But they thought I was much too melodic. Too much melody there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Were they looking for more like rhythmic kind of playing for the square dancing?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I don't know what they were looking for but it was modern squares. And they thought that Boil that Cabbage Down had too much melody.

**Julie Vallimont**

Interesting, to each their own.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right. So I went to it a couple of times, but it wasn't a lot of fun. In fact, I'm thinking now. Bill wasn't feeling well, and they had the first evening so he said, just go on your own. And I went there and walked in the door and the lady at the door said you're by yourself and I said yes. And she said, well, nobody will dance with you. So I said, well, my husband's sick, so I didn't have anybody to bring so everybody took pity on me and they all took turns dancing with me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's nice.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

But it seems like in that style of square dancing you're supposed to bring your own partner?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

You have to bring your own partner and it's very coupled.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's one of the things I love about contra dancing is that anybody can come and find somebody to dance with.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I know, that's one of the nice things about contra dancing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Okay, so we left off with 12 year old Sylvia learning piano from the piano books. And then how did you end up playing traditional music and fiddle tunes and when did the accordion come into the scene?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, it started out I really enjoyed dancing and my mother went to Ralph Page and Gene Gowing's dance camp, it was a day camp over in Peterborough one summer, and she took me with her. I was learning to dance squares. People didn't do contra dance, this is 1948. They were considered much too difficult and so they did squares. Now I hear people say, oh, I don't like squares, they're so difficult. So that was sort of the beginning of going to a dance camp and learning things. Ralph Page and Gene Gowing partnered and Gene taught English country dancing, and morris dancing and Ralph taught contras and squares which was lots of fun. The morris dancing was fun, but I was quite cross when I'd learned that only men did it. We could all learn that how to do the dances but you only had public appearances with men. Yeah, that's quite a change now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, thankfully.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

There was a pianist there. and she played for everything. I was just blown away to see this woman. She's playing all these dance tunes, and we're all dancing to her and I decided I wanted to be just like her.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you remember her name?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It may have been Beth Tolman, but I'm not sure about her last name. Her first name was Beth or Bess and Gene would get impatient with her and stop her and say now Bess, and so she'd stop and do it over again,

**Julie Vallimont**

What kind of style piano does she play?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It was just sort of standard boom chuck piano.

**Julie Vallimont**

Who were the other musicians?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

She was the class musician.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you were dancing to boom chuck piano? Did she also play a tune?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

She was playing melody.

**Julie Vallimont**

So she's playing melody and kind of accompanying herself on the piano. That's not easy even for the best piano player, that's not necessarily easy, you're doing two jobs at once.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

And so on Wednesday evening of that week that we went, they had the usual square dance, slash contra dance in town. I don't remember the musicians, you know, I was 12 and interested in boys. So I had lots of nice partners and that that was fun. So we moved back to Concord in 1947 mostly because the school situation in Woodsville was not very good. Starting with a teacher, who, because I was a year ahead of myself, who didn't feel that I belonged in her class because I was a year younger than everybody. And she told my parents that if I passed the seventh grade and came into the eighth grade where she was teaching, she'd make me repeat it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, well, that's not fun.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right. So that and besides the school was not very good. I mean, do you know where Woodsville is?

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know. There's a lot of New Hampshire I don't know very well. I know Peterborough and Nelson and the southern parts closer to Boston, but there's a lot of New Hampshire I've never gotten to explore.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, it's on the Connecticut River. And it's about 90 miles north. It was a railroad and lumbering town.

**Julie Vallimont**

So then you move to Concord, which is a bigger town.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

We moved to Concord because my parents had grown up here. My mom's family still lived here. They had a huge house and so that's what we moved into.

**Julie Vallimont**

How did you fall in love with the accordion and begin playing it?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, guess who played the accordion?

**Julie Vallimont**

Dudley Laufman?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that the answer? How did you come across Dudley?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, when I went to UNH, they had a dance club and I went to it all the time, you know, once a week. And once in a while Dudley would come, he walked, I wouldn't say swaggered into the hall, but he walked in and his accordion was hanging off his shoulder. And he was just so charismatic. I don't know if that has seeped through in your acquaintance with him. But he would walk in and the girls would all go, their hearts would go pitter pat and their mothers would go oh my god.

**Julie Vallimont**

So this is when Dudley still played a piano accordion? Right?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Before he switched to button accordion as he got older. So was this the first time you had seen anyone play a piano accordion for dancing like this?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, occasionally I'm sure I'd seen Bob McQuillen play because he at that time was playing accordion. But yeah, that was a first and Dudley was getting another accordion from Bob and so he wanted to sell the one he was currently playing and I got my dad to buy it for me.

**Julie Vallimont**

What was it like?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I have a great ear. One of my friends had a little eight button accordion, which you didn't really ever use and I started playing around with it and discovered that I could create music.

**Julie Vallimont**

So this is an eight button piano accordion. So there's like eight buttons on the left hand and maybe two octaves on the right hand?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

On the right hand but an octave and a half. It was very small.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those are fun, though. They're fun to play for dancing, because they're really punchy and light and easy to carry around.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

So that was my introduction to the accordion. And then Dudley was so encouraging all the time for everybody. And we'd be jamming or playing for a dance, and he asked for Fisher's Hornpipe and we'd struggle through it. And then he said, oh, I haven't heard Fisher's hornpipe sound like that for I don't know how long and of course all our hearts would go pitter patter. We would go home and practice like crazy.

**Julie Vallimont**

What other tunes were you learning at the time? What were some of the first tunes that you learned?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Fisher's Hornpipe in F and Rickett's Hornpipe, Devil's Dream, I have to think about this a little bit. In general, there were about 12 tunes that were common repertoire.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's that's actually approachable. 12 tunes. That's not too bad.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

No. And we never did medleys...

**Julie Vallimont**

So you said you did not do medleys, so you'd just played one tune for the dance.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

We played one tune, so by the time you had played Rickett's Hornpipe 17 times you were getting pretty good at doing it and the next week would be the same so you got a little bit better.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a good way to learn.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right.

**Julie Vallimont**

When did you start playing for dances? It sounds like you kind of learned on your own. You had some folks to play with. Maybe you sat in at the dances to learn the tunes?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I would sit in at the dances and there were lots of dances. I'm trying to think now. There was one dance every week and it was at the Manchester Country Club. And the man who called was quite happy to have people sitting in with the orchestra, so that was a weekly thing. I don't have a calendar in front of me but there were enough dances. And people sat in and there weren't any bands to speak of, except Ralph Page had a band. When I moved after college, and I had moved to Boston I was playing in the car one night, and he said, oh, well come and just sit in anytime you want at the Boston Y and so I did that frequently.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you would drive down to Boston and sit in there?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I was living down there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, I see. That was the time when you were there.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

So I finished college, I got a job in Boston, so I could dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a good reason. How is it different playing in Ralph Page's band than it was playing with Dudley in New Hampshire?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, Ralph always chose the tunes, as did Dudley and they were the same tunes pretty much every week. And I didn't feel that it was that much different. He did have a house band. Ed Koenig played the fiddle and then there was a bass player and then there was a piano player. Now the piano player, his name is Cy Kano. I think he's still living, although he's probably in the late 90s now. I saw him at the last NEFFA that we had. He was an MIT engineer and he read science fiction and he always had the book propped up there while he's playing and he's reading his science fiction. They were they were very nice and welcoming. Every once in a while there would be some really nice tune. If I was dancing I'd run up and ask them what the tune was and then I could look it up. One of the tunes that I liked is called Once Upon my Cheek and I never hear it anymore.

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know that tune. I've never encountered it.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I had a copy of Cole's [Cole's 1000 Fiddle Tunes] the first summer before I started my job. I had just gotten the accordion. I spent the whole summer playing that accordion and going through the Cole's, page by page, checking off the things that I liked.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's where you came across that tune?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I looked it up. I mean, Ralph had used it at his dance. Most of the time a tune that you like, you have heard it first and it really grabs you. And this one had a lot of arpeggios and you walk up the scale playing these arpeggios and that's what I liked.

**Julie Vallimont**

That sounds very classic for a dance tune.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I liked that tune and it has a couple of other names but it was out of Cole's.

**Julie Vallimont**

What were the bands made up of like instrument wise, how many people were there? What kind of instruments were there for either Ralph's band or Dudley's usual dance musicians?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, Dudley hired the musicians that were local, and he's calling everywhere. So he would hire New Hampshire musicians if he had a dance in New Hampshire, he would hire Boston area musicians if he had a dance in Boston. And usually the orchestra would have a fiddle and a piano and it was nice if there was a bass and an accordion.

**Julie Vallimont**

So it could be a four piece orchestra.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It would be a four piece orchestra. Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

So what was your job as the accordion player? Did you mostly play the melody? Did you do other things?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Most of the players that I met just played, boom chuck chords.I always played the melody.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you also play chords or just the melody?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I played chords too. Although today, my fingers aren't that agile, and I don't play as many chords and especially if I have another backup musician, it doesn't matter.

**Julie Vallimont**

The left hand of the accordion can be hard because you have to keep your hand in this cramped space and millimeters matter from one button to the next and you can't see what you're doing. Let's just turn this into an accordion podcast. It's not Contra Pulse anymore. Welcome to Accordion Breeze with Julie and Sylvia, let's just talk about accordions.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

When I moved to Boston, I looked up accordion schools, and there were quite a number. And so I signed up to take lessons with one because I hadn't ever had any real training, I had good piano background and that took care of the harmonies and it also took care of the right hand. But I didn't really know a whole lot about the left hand, except that whatever key you were playing in, you used the buttons for that key. And then you move the buttons up one row to play the seventh chords, and down one to play the sub dominant.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, that is the fun thing about the left hand of the accordion is that the way the buttons are organized in rows, they're just patterns. And so you can change keys without having to learn any new patterns.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It was nice.

**Julie Vallimont**

What was Ralph Page's band like compared to Dudley's in terms of how many instruments there were and how many people?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Oh, the Boston band had three people and then there were people who came and sat in, you know, Jack O'Connor, I don't know if you know him at all.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I do.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Okay. So it was Jack and me and then whoever else happened to be in town or wanted to do some more playing could come and sit in. And then Dudley, as I said, he hired the musicians that were nearby. So one summer, the whole summer he was playing in Nelson and he hired me almost every week. And I think Kay Gilbert was the piano player and Allan Block was the fiddler, Allan was difficult to play with. Did you ever meet him?

**Julie Vallimont**

No, No, I didn't. I've heard his name. But I've never met him.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

While he was a southern musician to begin with, and really very good, but he'd be kind of abrupt, he'd be playing along and all of a sudden, he shoved the microphone in your face and say, you take it, whether you knew the tune or not.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's not always fun to be put on the spot like that, I can imagine.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I'm quite happy to take solos if I know the tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. Because it's not like soloing is really a thing. You know, like, you're not going to make up some kind of jazz improvise solo if you don't know the tune, the expectation is that you're going to play the tune. So if you don't know what the tune is then you have to fake the tune which is not exactly free expression, right? That just sounds stressful to me.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I learned a lot from the classes that I was taking, but they wouldn't let me play my traditional music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, what kind of classes, was it like, classical accordion oriented or polka oriented?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It was, I think, classical technique, but the music was showtunes. They were okay, but I really wanted to play my traditional music.

**Julie Vallimont**

How did you end up with Scottish music?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, again, that came through the came through the dance. When I was at UNH there was a special group that did Scottish country dancing, which I had never seen before. But it has a lot of the figures are the same or they're not the same, but close enough. So I went one time, and then I was invited to stay and I thought that was great. Going down the middle and up was just like flying. The Boston branch met on Monday nights. And there was a couple who lived in Exeter. They did a lot of teaching and calling and such. They drove down every Monday night to go to the Boston branch Scottish classes. And so I would go down and sometimes my boyfriend would come with me or other people. I was immediately accepted into the intermediate class but I was not accepted into the advanced class. Okay, [Sylvia's cat enters the video frame] this is McQuillen by the way. Is he showing up or not?

**Julie Vallimont**

No.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Oh, he's not? Well...

**Julie Vallimont**

Okay, so for listeners out there. We are currently looking at the cat, very charming cat.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Who is named McQuillen, by the way.

**Julie Vallimont**

McQuillen. It's a good name for a cat. Well, I'm glad you have company over there.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I really loved the Scottish dancing. It was a lot of fun. And at NEFFA, I was not part of the group yet, and they all came in it was in Worcester and I remember sitting in the bleachers and watching the Scots march in and they marched and they marched and they marched and they marched, a never ending column of people. And I thought, I'm going to be there next year.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

And I was.

**Julie Vallimont**

And so did that make you a lifelong Scottish country dancer? And you also played music for Scottish country dancing?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I really, really loved the dancing. Yes. And then the Scots would publish books of dances, and they always had the music with them, too. So that was nice, because I read music easily. I started learning the tunes and that was fun. And actually, I offered to play for some of the classes and that went over like a lead balloon.

**Julie Vallimont**

Why do you think that is?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Is he bothering you now?

**Julie Vallimont**

I can't see the cat. He's okay, good. It's cool. He can just do his cat thing.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

So the Scots had this belief, which is not really correct, that unless you were born and brought up in Scotland, you couldn't play the music. And so they totally ignored any American who wanted to play. Now I understand a little bit more. There's so much technique and interpretation of the Scottish tunes, and there were no people around to tell you how to do it. So I can understand why they would be disappointed. If you are listening to a record that's got two accordions and a fiddle and a hi-hat cymbal. It's not going to sound like a solo instrument and so it didn't sound right.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because they were used to a different sound from recordings than what you were giving them?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes, although at that time, most of the Scottish bands were accordion based.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think it's true that you know, for just about any traditional kind of music, the notes on the page are only a small amount of the inflection of the tune and it takes playing a kind of music a long time to get all the ornaments and the rhythms and the note lengths and just the feel in your fingers.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I think I have mastered that pretty much now, after all these years,

**Julie Vallimont**

You've had a while.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I had a while and I've been to Scotland four times and two of them for taking classes.

**Julie Vallimont**

What were your classes like?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I don't like to say they were kind of dull. When you were practicing, you practiced the whole eight rounds of the tune. You didn't practice half of it or anything like that. And they did switch, I can see the evolution of the Scottish music over the years. Because when they were first doing recordings, there was a limit to the amount of time you had on a vinyl record. Right. So they would play three tunes, first tune, repeat, second tune, repeat, third tune, repeat. And instead of a fourth tune, going back to the first tune, because that's one of their styles. You start out with named tune, and you finish with that tune. So that was one of the things that that I learned. I also learned a lot about starting and stopping, and how to do it nicely. So this brings us up to the early 70s. There was a Scottish Dance group in Manchester and they were tightly tied up to the Boston group, Boston branch. And every once in a while there would be a live musician. Well, if this was a person from Scotland that they had brought in, they would be quite happy with it. But if it was an American, they would complain and they would say, we've got to get rid of those wretched musicians that can't play it. I'm going to resign from the group if something isn't done about those wretched musicians. I knew these wretched musicians, and they were good musicians, but they just needed some more chops on how to do it. So the Boston branch put on a weekend and they brought in a Scot from Canada, Angus MacKinnon. That was really nice, because he gave us a lot of points on things like, he told the drummer, play it as if you have a package of frozen peas and you're dribbling them into the frying pan and that's what it's supposed to sound like.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's very evocative.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, playing for Scottish country dance can be complex. The dancers have certain expectations of the music, they need the feel to be right, the right tunes, they need the tempo to be right. And then there's how to start the dance and how to end the dance. There's a lot involved in that.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right. And they're very strict about well, of course, if you're playing for dancing, you have to have the right tempo whether it's a Foxtrot, or a Scottish Dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, that really affects the feel for the dance. I think for some folks like the joy is in the dance done well, because you are flying and you're all moving together. I think how well you do the dance matters, in a sense and so you need the music to be there to support you in that.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right. The other thing is that the strathspeys are only found in Scottish music. And so there really were no Scottish musicians around to lead groups and teach people how to do it. You couldn't just play jigs and reels all night. A standard Scottish program is you start with a jig and then you do a strathspey and then you do a reel and that's the format for the evening.

**Julie Vallimont**

Let's contrast that with the typical contra dance from the time. Like when you started going to contra dances, what was the typical format for an evening? What kind of dances was say Dudley or Ralph calling?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, Ralph never changed tunes. So he would tell us what he wanted us to play. Fisher's Hornpipe, so we saw away on Fisher's Hornpipe for 10 or 15 times.

**Julie Vallimont**

So it's mostly reels and jigs.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Reels and jigs, yeah. Oh, and marches, Ralph loved playing marches. He loved that and they're such fun to play.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you remember some of the classic marches?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Meeting of the Waters, O'Donnell Abú, All the Way to Galway, and then Canadian tunes, French Canadian tunes. That was what I first cut my teeth on, there were very few Irish tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

I guess having proximity to Quebec.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes. New Hampshire is 30 percent French Canadian.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, exactly. There's a big influence throughout Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

And those those tunes are fun and easy. Some of them are easy to play, some of them are really hard.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Well, some tunes that were written on the fiddle don't work well on the accordion and some do...

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right. But every once in a while, you find something that is based on the fiddle and the accordions say, "What do you mean?"

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. I love those tunes, arpeggios can be very simple on the accordion.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I wrote a pair of tunes and one of them was in G, and then I transposed it down to E minor. And that was fine, except that it has a few D sharps in it. I had given the tunes to somebody and they said, you're trying to kill us. What are you doing that for? So we're getting off track, I think but.

**Julie Vallimont**

But let's go back to the music a little bit for dancing. If you are the accordion in the band, are you mostly, back then, were you mostly either playing the melody or taking a break? Did you ever play harmonies or anything else?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I would play the melody. I would harmonize a bit. I'm not all that great at it. When I listen to what Kate Barnes is doing, what you're doing, is beyond me. So mostly, I would play the melody and then I figured somebody's got to play the melody to hold up the people who are trying to harmonize.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, exactly.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

So that was my excuse.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. You allow them to harmonize, it's important.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

We recorded a tune, which was full of improv. When we finished laying down the first track, we suddenly realized that there was nothing but improv. So we went back in and I laid down the melody and they improv-ed to their heart's content.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's fun. So I'm curious to get a sense of the ways that contra dancing has changed and how it was like back then, I certainly couldn't dance back then. And some of the other callers that maybe we don't talk about now and how they did things. Who were the other callers who were calling back then when you first started?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Oh, let's see. I have to think a little bit. There was a little core of people in New Hampshire, that called. It was Arthur Tufts and Barney Priest, and Freddy Pulsifer. And I bet you've never heard of any of these names?

**Julie Vallimont**

Nope.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

And Johnny Trafton and let's see who else, that was about it. And then in Boston, Charlie Webster, who lived at old Joe's, and he was calling until a couple of years ago.

**Julie Vallimont**

What were their styles like?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Oh, and I forgot Duke Miller who called every weekend in the summertime, over in Peterborough, and in Dublin. He had a marvelous voice and he called and did singing squares and he did regular sort of four by four squares and he would do some contras. I've got a bunch of tapes of Duke calling.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, cool.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yeah, which is really cool.

**Julie Vallimont**

So in those days, it was mostly squares, and not as many contras?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It was squares, yeah. And some of the other dances, you'd do a set of squares, and then they would do some ballroom dances, like a polka, or schottische or two step. I'm trying to think of some of the other things that they would do. And we would play those. But the thing is, especially in Boston, Boston two step, you know that?

**Julie Vallimont**

I've heard of it, but I don't know it.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, the problem is, these couple dances have died out, because most of them had their own tune. And then the new musicians coming in, didn't know those tunes, and where are you going to find them? We didn't have the access to the internet and so they just kind of died out, which I think is a real tragedy. I would like to see them coming back. But everybody's so busy lining up, as soon as they finish with one contra they have to line up with the next one.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's a big social shift. People don't want to do a lot a couple dancing. They want to dance, dance, dance, dance, dance contras. When did you see that change start to happen?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

In the late 70's, that's when I was beginning to do much more playing. I think it was the singing squares are eight bars long, sometimes. 16 and they were mostly visiting squares. I think people got tired of doing them. They want something new. And definitely the musicians didn't want to be playing singing squares all night. Golden Slippers, you play it A, A, B, and that's once through the dance. I figured out, being bored out of my skull one night, and I'm thinking as I'm playing it, how many times through do I have to do this? Twenty four.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, Golden Slippers is a pretty simple tune too.There's not a lot of nuance there. I mean, it's a great tune and it's fun, but I could see how if you're doing it every week. It's fun as a novelty. You know, that tune is [sings tune]. Can you sing the chorus?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Oh, them golden slippers. Oh, them golden slippers, golden slippers. I can't remember the words [sings tune].

**Julie Vallimont**

That's "Walk the golden streets..." It's great, but it's simple.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

The version that the caller used that I played for mostly, you played it A,A,B.

**Julie Vallimont**

So just one chorus.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

One chorus.

**Julie Vallimont**

Two verses. So the dancers seem to be more and more interested in these contra dances which add different kinds of music and just a different way of moving it sounds like.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes. And now I know that people, if you say you're going to do a square, they'll go and sit down.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I know, times have changed. I remember there was that summer at Maine fiddle camp for one of our classes where you taught everyone the varsovienne.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Talking about couple dances that people don't do anymore. Do you want to talk about that one a little bit?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, there were half a dozen couple dances that you could do in between your contras, and squares while you cool down a little bit.

**Julie Vallimont**

That sounds lovely to me honestly.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

So varsovienne it's a worldwide dance, I think it's European, I think it may have come from Poland but there are versions all through Europe. Now the Irish have the "shoe the pony"which is basically a varsovienne, very fast. And it's known as Put Your Little Foot because of the first figure, first movement, you put your little foot and you put your little foot, you put your little foot right in, and at that point, you cross in front of your partner and you have a little eye to eye. And then in the other way back, put your little foot, put your little foot, put your little foot right there, and then you cross back. Then you cross in front of your partner and back and in front of your partner and back and then the last part is you waltz for eight bars.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a charming dance. It's a lot of fun to do.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It's charming and I wish that they would do more of them.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think these days people want things with more eye contact.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I mean, it's known as varsovienne position. Have you got your hands up, and it's man's right in your right and man's left in your left and he's got his arm over your shoulders.

**Julie Vallimont**

So that your partner's kind of standing behind you in a sense.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, you're side by side.

**Julie Vallimont**

Can you sing the tune for us once?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I think that's really flirtatious.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, yeah, I mean, it is, isn't it? It's a different kind of flirtation.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It's a really sexy little dance! And then when you're moving back and forth, you have this little moment you you move and the woman, you move back and you ogle them, and you move here and you move there. And then you turn under your arm and you waltz eight bars.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you get that moment where you finally get to turn and face each other. So it's like delayed gratification. It's very clever.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes. And there was another dance, it was called the Roberts. Gay Gordons, pretty much a lot of people know the Gay Gordon's. I'm seeing a blank look.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, I'm just listening.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

So nobody does the Roberts anymore and the Gay Gordons and Road to the Isles. Once in a while, you find somebody knows the Road to the Isles and about a half a dozen that are almost dead, but not quite and the Boston Two Step.

**Julie Vallimont**

What's the Boston Two Step?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, a Boston is a step. I didn't know that until recently, and it's a couple dance. You balanced away and in and walk in turn by yourself. You balance in and out and walk back. And then you take to a couple of slides here and a couple of slides there and then you do four polka steps in closed position.

**Julie Vallimont**

So it sounds a little bit more of an upbeat kind of dance.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It's nice and pretty and there is a tune written for it, which is a real bear to play and then I found another tune which was also labeled Boston Two Step, which is much easier.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's why it was fun when you taught the class the varsovienne because the tune is so simple. Put your little foot, put your little foot right here. And then the chorus, [sings tune]. Very simple, straightforward.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Then there's the part with the waltz. [sings tune].

**Julie Vallimont**

Perfect. That was really fun.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Would you like to hear the varsovienne?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes, absolutely. I didn't know you had an accordion with you. This is a special treat folks. Sylvia is just strapping herself in, maybe that's also why we're good at making small talk as accordion players because you usually have to talk for like 30 seconds to your accordion class, while you put your accordion on and fasten the backstrap and get yourself all situated.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

And this guy is really too heavy for me these days.

**Julie Vallimont**

The good news is, or the bad news, is that we don't have to tune first. For better for worse.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

No you don't have to tune, you have to make sure you have your fingers in the right spot. [Plays tune].

**Julie Vallimont**

So let's talk a little bit about the Canterbury Dance Orchestra, which you have played with for many years, you've been on several Canterbury Dance orchestra albums. You want to talk about that time in your life?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Oh, yes. That was when I first heard the blue record Canterbury Country Dance Orchestra, the very first record that came out. That was really the first time anybody had recorded these tunes for dancing. It was recorded in Massachusetts at the Middlesex school. They had a chapel and the acoustics really came in this because you had the Middlesex school and it had a chapel and it had an atrium between the roof and the ceiling, which is a big space. I think that's what made a lot of the excitement. And when Dudley did his Welcome Here Again, he hired the Middlesex chapel again so it would sound just almost just like that. Dudley liked to use fiddle, accordion and flute and bass and a piano. If you could get them all together, that was his ideal music.

**Julie Vallimont**

So a lot of people if they think dance orchestra, I feel like they often think of the big orchestras that we have now at NEFFA like the NEFFA Festival Orchestra. But it sounds like these dance orchestras back in the day weren't especially large, you know, four to six people something like that.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yeah and the accordion has gone out of fashion, I think in part because there were only two places where you could get them repaired. A lot of people could restring or repair a fiddle. But you had to take it to the factory to get it repaired.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, it's interesting when you say that it's out of fashion because there was a time when accordions were extremely popular, right?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes, and then the Beatles came in.

**Julie Vallimont**

If only Paul McCartney had played accordion, that would have been so great. I think the accordion has not disappeared from contra dancing at all and there's a lot of well known accordionists.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It's coming back.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's coming back, but it is a lot harder to find accordions, to get them repaired. You know, there's only a few repair shops and the repair shops, we have they're kind of like legendary places in the community because there aren't that many of them. So if you want to meet other accordion players go hang out at the Button Box in Western Mass. I always run into fun people at the Button Box and there's accordion shops in New Hampshire and I've driven to Pennsylvania before.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

There's no accordion shop in New Hampshire anymore. Oh, yeah. because well, Arthur Walsh retired and he's passed away now.

**Julie Vallimont**

I thought there was one left.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

No, sorry about that.

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, there's a few in Boston, there's a few more of the old timers who were from Italy who immigrated to Boston, and they had accordion shops. It's a different kind of music.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Did you ever hear about Tozy’s...where people took their accordion to be repaired?

**Julie Vallimont**

No.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

That was Tozy’s Rod, Gun, Rifle, and Accordion shop.

**Julie Vallimont**

Really?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes. And they were in South Boston and in the Italian section and big plate glass window and it had the rods, the guns, and a couple of accordions.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's amazing. Yeah. All your hunting, fishing, self protection and accordion needs.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes. I went down one time, because I was concerned that the accordion bellows were leaking. And we strolled around the shop for a while and like kicking the tires when you go to a secondhand car place. And finally, he was willing to talk to me and I said that I was concerned about how it was going, how the accordion was acting. And he picked it up and said, No, it's alright.

**Julie Vallimont**

So he picked it up and kind of held the bellows out to see if they would extend or not. Sylvia's gesturing is that the accordion the sideways and being held up by the straps and then you let the bellows, the keyboard and hang down and if the if the bellows are leaky, then air can get in and so they'll slowly expand like an accordion opening up. I guess that's not a great analogy. The accordion expanded like an accordion, not the most amazing prose on my part.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, at Maine fiddle camp, there was a little boy and I'm sure you met him. His mother came in to see about being part of the fiddle camp and his accordion was so leaky, that it was impossible to play.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, cause you can't even get a whole note out before the bellows are just empty...

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I explained as best as I could and as nicely as I could. Probably, they should look for a different accordion and come back next year.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, there's always loaner accordions at camp. Doug [Protsik] always has a few. I always brought a couple. Usually there's some nice camper who's got one in their tent or something that they're willing to share.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, he was he was pretty little too. And then there was the other little boy. I can't think of his name right now but he had so much enthusiasm, had his accordion which didn't fit him. You know, you met him because after I discovered what was wrong with the accordion and nobody else had picked it up, I was able to show him what was wrong with it.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember, and we've had people come in with sticky bass buttons where they only played diminished chords. That's unpleasant. People come in without wrist straps. Often people have to find accordions at a yard sale or something, been in someone's attic. You can find them on Craigslist, but they've often been in someone's attic for 40 or 50 years and often they smell kind of musty, often the bellows are tight or the leather has just aged with time.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right.

**Julie Vallimont**

I never really stopped to think about what it would be like if we played a popular common instrument? If you could just go into any music shop and if you play guitar, you can go into most shops and say, hey, I need you to reset my frets or I need to adjust the action or do something with the truss rod. I'm faking guitar terms here. But you know, whatever they do with their guitars. You can't do that with an accordion. If you do that, they'll often look at you funny. I've heard of people finding accordion repairman to meet them in a parking lot outside like they each drove two hours to get there. I myself have driven six hours to New York State to get my accordion fixed. I feel like if you find an accordion repair person who you like, it's like, if you have a mechanic and you keep them for life, it's just like, that's your person that you take your accordion in for. It's just, it's this quirkiness of playing that instrument for sure. But I think the accordion players often have a camaraderie because of that. It's like we're in a secret club, it makes it really fun. Do you want to play us some of these other classic tunes while you have your accordion here?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

One we never hear because it doesn't really fit into a contra dance. But one of the square dances that we often played was Les Fraises et les Framboises. Do you know that?

**Julie Vallimont**

I've heard it. I think we played it at Maine fiddle camp in the evening dance.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right. [Plays tune].

**Julie Vallimont**

Lovely, what was that dance like?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, it would be a square.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh it's a square, that's right.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It would be a square because the tune is only 16 bars long. Dancers get all muddled up if you try to use a 16 bar tune. Is this the first part of the tune or is this the second part of it tune?

**Julie Vallimont**

Right? You mean for contra?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

For contra.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

We would promenade. Everybody would promenade the ring when we did the B part and they'd sing "oh les fraises et les framboises, oh la la la la la, oh les fraises et les framboises, oh la la la la la."

**Julie Vallimont**

So that's strawberries and raspberries?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

What was the rest of the song about? It sounds charming. I love strawberries and raspberries.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, it's got a lot of verses. Basically, it's about...I was out walking in summer, and I met two luscious young ladies and then it goes on from there.

**Julie Vallimont**

I see of course. How about the Boston Two Step?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Okay. Well, I don't play that without a lot of practicing, the Boston Two Step tune I don't play in public.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I'm putting you on the spot here. You can pick any tune you like. [Plays tune].

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I can't remember the second half. But that's the first half and it just goes so nicely.

**Julie Vallimont**

These charming tunes, they just seem like very classic New England tunes. But a lot of them are influenced, like we did an interview with Jeremiah McLane a few months ago and you know, he was talking about the influence of English tunes. They have that real...like either morris tunes or other kinds of dance tunes and they have that real feel to them.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, this tune that I can play the A part without any music, is from Shetland. Tom Anderson tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, yeah. Lovely.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

The original Boston two step tune is a three part tune and it changes key and it's in B flat and it's not easy to sight read.

**Julie Vallimont**

How about that tune you mentioned before that you learned from Cole's, that Ralph Page?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Oh, Once upon my Cheek?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, will you play Once Upon my Cheek?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I am very rusty on this. But the B part is duck soup. [Plays tune] I'm not sure I want all that broadcast.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's fine, we don't have to include it, it's just fun to reminisce. I mean, none of us have played for more than a year so everybody's rusty right now.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I should practice but it's not fun just noodling around and I play a lot of tunes that I know in my sleep and that's about it.

**Julie Vallimont**

What were some of Dudley's other favorite tunes that you'd play often?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

[plays tune]

**Julie Vallimont**

Charming.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

That's Blue Bird or L'oiseaux bleu

**Julie Vallimont**

Charming, I love these tunes, just can't get enough of them..

**Sylvia Miskoe**

And then there was another tune that was popular for a little while called Bluebell. And it's very much like Glise de Sherbrooke, but slower. [Plays tune].

**Sylvia Miskoe**

If you just change the accents a little bit and speed it up, it becomes Glise de Sherbrooke.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's funny, a lot of common elements.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right.

**Julie Vallimont**

Now listening to you play it, I can't help but reflect on the way even that accordion tone and style have changed over the years. One thing I've noticed is that there's a trend towards, we call it wetness in accordions. There's two reeds played together and how far apart they're tuned. Could you just play a single note for us? And just hold it for a second?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

[plays A note] That's my 440, factory-built A.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. So that is one A as dry as it can be, because there's only one of them. But now put on your double reed setting and let us hear that.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

[plays A note]

**Julie Vallimont**

They sound like they're out of tune with each other. It's very intentional.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

That's the one I like best.

**Julie Vallimont**

So that sound, we call that a wet sound and wetness is how far apart the two reeds are tuned and you can hear they kind of beat against each other.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Oh, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

But in context, it gives it a lot of lift and verve and it really cuts through it gives it a lot of timbre.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

And it makes the fiddlers cross.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, right? They don't know. It makes it hard to play good intonation, too, but I feel like that was the standard for older style New England music is having a more wet tuned accordion and especially in Scottish music, still, it's common to have that really wet tuning. And there's some recordings that even have three reeds that are all the same note but each of them tuned a few cents off from the main note but I think there's a trend especially in contra dancing now for accordions to sound a lot closer together. I took a survey, maybe 10 years ago, and I asked all the accordionists I knew how many cents apart their reeds were tuned, the farthest was like 12. But a lot of them were six cents, four cents. So it just sounds like a very faint chorus. It just warms up the sound, but you can't hear that beating anymore and I think that's a big change that's happened.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I was just thinking, I'm just, I'm trying to start myself off with this strathspey. And you can see why if you didn't have a lot of Scots around, and Scots, who played you'd never really know how to do it. [Plays tune.]

**Julie Vallimont**

What strathspey was that?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

That's called Scotch Mist. It was one of the first ones that I learned, and that's my go to if I'm doing anything to step practice. But you can see, you could never write that down. You could get the line of notes but you could never write down how I was playing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right, the rhythmic timing, the snaps and everything.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

The snaps and you just have to learn it by ear with somebody who knows how.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and dancing, it helps your body understand how the tunes are supposed to go, as well. How about a tune? How about a quintessential New England tune?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

[Sylvia plays tune]

**Julie Vallimont**

That sounded like Hull's Victory to me.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Now did you know that Hulls' Victory Is a piece from Telemann?

**Julie Vallimont**

No.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I went to a concert one night, and it was a classical concert. The person that was leading it started out and he played Hull's Victory. It changes a little bit in the B part.

**Julie Vallimont**

There are a lot of tunes that borrow from classical motifs. But also, there are a lot of classical motifs that borrow from folk tunes.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes, so I don't know which came first.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, thank you for playing your accordion for us. That's really fun. Do you sit in with contra dances these days? Do you tend to play with the same folks? Do you play with young folks?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I play with the Strathspey and Reel Society. I don't lead it anymore but I've played with them. I've mentored some of the members of it. How do you how do you play for class? So I tell them how to do it.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you also, as a teacher, you had a traditional arts apprenticeship through the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, where you are mentoring someone in accordion playing. What was that experience like? What are the things that are most important for you to teach to a new accordion player?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, fingering and technique because if you don't have a good technique, it's all mushy. And treatment of the buttons, the base buttons. You play them as if they're red hot.

**Julie Vallimont**

Which means you touch them and then get your finger right off of it.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

That's right. Because otherwise it's [plays music] that's no fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, the accordion can be very overbearing and plodding...

**Sylvia Miskoe**

But if you play the buttons as if they're really hot...

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I think that's a lighter style and it gives it a lift, which is what you want for dancing. What are some of the other things that you focus on? Do you talk about repertoire?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I touch on repertoire. The first year I was teaching, I had an elderly lady and she was so excited, because now she could learn about diminished chords. You've probably heard this story before. And I said, I don't use them and she said, but I need to know how to be able to play the diminished chords. And I said, forget them, we don't use them in...them in this kind of music. So Jeremiah did a cameo appearance that week. And she immediately said, I want to know about playing diminished chords. He said, forget them, we don't use them. And so I said, Alright, Virginia, why are you so obsessed with learning how to play diminished chords? She said, it's the next chapter in my tune book.

**Julie Vallimont**

She had a chapter on diminished chords in her book? A classical lesson book or something?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's so funny. Classical music uses diminished chords. Like traditional music uses half diminished chords, often, but very rarely a fully diminished chord. Yeah, well, that's why we don't worry about the books.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

And then repertoire. And, of course, I would go to Maine fiddle camp with a nice set of tunes that I thought I would be introducing and the class would be completely different.

**Julie Vallimont**

Depending on who the class is made out of, and things like that.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I leaned on Doug [Protsik] and Bill [Olson]...every year, you've got to split it with two teachers, because you...it's impossible to teach the whole spectrum of kids.

**Julie Vallimont**

So that's having two different levels of the accordion class, just like all the other classes.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Otherwise, I'm focusing on the beginners and I've lost half the good people, or focusing on the better people and the beginners are totally lost.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then, of course, people learn at different speeds. So really, you need three classes, because some of the folks who are learning in the beginning of the week can pick it up pretty fast if they played another instrument before. That's the nice thing about being able to do an individual apprenticeship with someone is that you can really focus on what they need at their own pace.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I was doing a little exercise about ear in-toning, and I had this woman and she had a button box. And she kept saying, oh, if I had the music, I'd be able to play this, we're supposed to be teaching by ear. And she said, finally, I was doing a little bit of what's this note? Is this note higher? Is this note lower? And I walked down the scale. So I was going...[plays scale]

**Sylvia Miskoe**

That is so definitely lower. I got to a third. She was very puzzled. She could do that. She couldn't tell the difference between the third and something else. So I gave her the books, the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because it's gonna be hard for her to learn from ear if she can't hear this interval. Sometimes music can help people train their ears to be able to hear them on their own. Do you want to go ahead and take your accordion off, would you be more comfortable that way?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Oh, no, it's quite comfortable. I just dont want the bellows to keep falling down.

**Julie Vallimont**

One thing I'd love to ask you about is in your email to me, you mentioned having the experience of going to the New Hampshire folk festivals like one of the first ones, and seeing five or six elderly fiddlers on stage. And you said the next year there were only three and someone remarked, what are we going to do when they have passed? There's no musicians to follow their footsteps. Fortunately, as you said that prediction was wrong. But what was it like then? And how did that all come about?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I had I think there were five fiddlers and a piano and all the fiddlers were very old.

**Julie Vallimont**

What year was this?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

1948 or 1949 and people who were running the festival were worried about gosh, are they going to be here next year? And the next year, some of them were not. But just on that cusp was when Dudley was playing and some of the younger newer musicians were coming through and so saved by the bell.

**Julie Vallimont**

So Dudley was one of those musicians. Do you remember who any of the others were?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Dudley was the leader

**Julie Vallimont**

That also inspired you to learn to play for dances.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It really inspired me and I had another friend who had an accordion and but she stopped playing when she had babies.

**Julie Vallimont**

I would just love to kind of conclude with your thoughts about you've watched a lot of changes in the dance scene over the years and the style of dancing. You mentioned wanting to talk about that, what do you think about modern contra dancing? Do you go to modern dances?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, if I was 25, and fit, it wouldn't even impinge on me, probably, but I'm not. I complained to Alice [Morris] one time I said, you've got two swings in every single dance. And she said, yeah, because if I don't have two swings in every dance, the dancers will yell at me. So my technique for that is to get up to the front of the line and when I get down to the bottom, sit down. Because I can't do two swings. I can do them just fine but then my leg gets tired.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, so this is a partner swing and a neighbor swing, people want both.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

They want both. It's too bad that you must have two swings per iteration. That means that there are a lot of figures that get left out. Because the dance is going to be 32 bars and you've already taken eight bars away. You have to have some sort of progression. There's another eight bars. And what else can you put in. I've forgotten if you do any calling Julie?

**Julie Vallimont**

I've spent a lot of time next to callers. I definitely don't do any calling. But I like to observe and notice things. I used to go to calling workshops actually, when I was a newer musician. I would still go to them sometimes just because I love hearing how callers think about what they're doing. As a contra dance musician, if you want to understand how the dance and the music relate there's no better way than go to a calling workshop where the callers is breaking down everything that they're thinking about it. It's really useful. But no, I don't call, do you call?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I've been to a couple of calling workshops and and a whole week of learning how to call. I did it for a bit and then I decided that what I really liked to do was play. I could call if I had to and I could do little simple one night stand dances.

**Julie Vallimont**

I could maybe call one dance. I think the only dance I've ever called is the Baby Rose by David Kaynor, a lovely simple dance. It's like one of those modern traditional dances. A lot of times they call it if there's beginners at the dance or something. It's simple, it's fun. You know, maybe that's the only one I could do. I feel like every musician should be able to call one dance, just in case the caller's late or the car breaks down or something. But that's about it for me. We were talking about couple dances and how some of them had disappeared. I even notice circle dances have been disappearing even over the 15 years or so that I was dancing I noticed that.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

You mean, circle mixers?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, like mixers, things like that either, like Circassian Circles, or even dances like La Bastringue, which used to be more common. There were callers who would call a circle mixer in Boston and you could tell the dancers were not happy with it. I love mixers, I think they're fun but that's another thing that's kind of on the way out.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Most of the time when I am playing or dancing, it's in New Hampshire and they almost always do at least one mixer. And La Bastringue also is often very popular. Here's a funny story, for quite a while I was the band boss for the Milford Dance. Some people knew how to play, a lot of people didn't and I molded them into a decent band. So we had this caller, he always liked to start out with La Bastringue and I would notice that we would be off the beat. You know, we had dropped eight bars, or picked up eight bars and I didn't know how we're doing it, but I got the players to listen to me, because I'm gonna have to say another eight, or go right into B. They'll do the B now. I just couldn't figure out what was going on. So I talked to him one night and I said, you're always dropping or adding bars. And he said, Really? And I said yes. Oh, well, I wait till everybody's finished the figure. After that I just kind of ignored how many bars...

**Julie Vallimont**

You just have to do what you can do in that situation. As long as everybody's having fun it doesn't matter too much. The rest is just details.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I left out one of my nice stories about playing for Scottish. I had talked about how the Scots liked live music. I got a call from one of the big wheels in Boston one time in the early 70's. He said, would you be free to come down and play for a workshop on Saturday and this is like on Wednesday or so. I got myself organized and the kids and the horses and everything else and the husband. So I went in and it turns out that they had brought this teacher over from Scotland to do some special workshops. When she found out that they were going to use records she said no, no. I won't work with records. You have to have a musician. And Marianne Taylor was booked at that time and that was me.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's good that that emphasis is what helps keep live music alive and well. It gives musicians something to aspire to and you keep hiring them, they keep working and they don't get rusty, which is also important. There's a lot of folks for whom their only practice is playing for the dance really, you have a day job and a family and not a lot of folks who can afford to spend all day practicing and then go to a dance at night.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I had to juggle. At one time, it was easy, because I had the music in the wintertime. And I had the kids and the horses and the haying and things like that in the summertime. But then more and more I got hired for summer stuff as well.

**Julie Vallimont**

So now you have the kids and the horses and the dances and the haying in the summer. Two kinds of heying, get it?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Right. Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thank you. I'll be here all night, everyone.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

You know, the Scots can do heys-for-three except they call them reels, reels-for-three and reels-for-four and the contra dancers have no idea how to do a reel-for-three.

**Julie Vallimont**

We only do one kind of hey. It's interesting in English country dancing, they also do other kinds of heys. It's fun watching contra dance, I feel like contra dancers if they're going to try another style of dance, English is accessible enough. They're often at similar events and things like that, whereas Scottish country dancing I think takes a little bit more of a learning curve to just jump into and so it's fun watching contra dancers learn these new kinds of heys, doing English dancing, you know. But it's such a cool feeling when you don't understand how something works and then all of a sudden it clicks in your body. It's such a great feel, it's the best thing. Well, where do you think the future of contra dancing is headed, what are your thoughts about it?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

As of right now, I don't know. Because when the pandemic hit, not only did the dancing sort of cease, but one of the things that made it cease was that the halls shut, and nobody is going to rent out a hall for a bunch of people. It was a sort of a double whammy. And now I'm hearing from people, do you think the English Dance will continue? Because we had a monthly English Dance up here and so who knows what's gonna happen?

**Julie Vallimont**

Are you wondering if some of these halls are going to be able to stay functioning as halls? They still have heat to pay and taxes to pay and those kind of things if no one's renting them out.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, a lot of them are associated with a church or a meeting place. But who knows what's gonna happen with them.

**Julie Vallimont**

I know there's been fundraisers for a lot of places, like places that are specifically dance halls, you know, like the Guiding Star Grange in Greenfield where that's their reason for existing, you know, that's their income.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

And they were about to close down and David Kaynor was the spearhead to revive them.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, back in the day?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Just recently.

**Julie Vallimont**

In Greenfield?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

In Greenfield, yeah. The membership was dwindling and there was a lot of. I'm sort of hearing this second hand, but there's a lot of discussion about could we keep the hall, can we manage to keep it running? David joined the grange and got all his friends to join the grange. [This happened in the early 2000's.]

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, we have to protect our halls. Some halls are attached to government buildings and town halls too. It just feels like a very New England thing you know, going to Peterborough and dancing in the town hall. Hopefully, some of those things will be preserved, but maybe churches and other organizations will have to decide if they still want to have a function room or if they want to use it for something else.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

We have a Scottish group that met in a really nice church. No, it was a nursing home and it had a nice big recreation hall and a beautiful wood floor and everything. Somebody donated money so that they could carpet it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's not the right direction now is it? How generous of that person.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Obviously, that person didn't dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

It probably didn't even occur to them why you wouldn't want to carpet a beautiful hardwood floor, probably wasn't even a question for them. What about the music? What direction do you see the music heading?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I think it's still going to survive. I know it's going to change a bit but I think there are enough groups that get together to play and they play these tunes anyway so they're still keeping the music going. You have to have a hall, you can have a group that plays and gets together and plays, but you have to have a big enough space to run a dance. I think the music is still going to keep going because there are enough groups that want to keep playing the music, like the Boston Fiddle Club, and New Hampshire's Strathspey and reel Society for Scottish music. And at the moment, there are some groups that like to get together anyway.

**Julie Vallimont**

So it's a question of keeping spaces available for us to dance in?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is there anything else you want to share with us? Feel free to add anything else you'd like.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I'm not quite sure. I'm just trying to think. We talked about early dancing, we talked about couples and we talked about Scottish and how I got into that. There was a fellow when I was first playing and I would go to this little Wednesday Country Club Dance, and play... We played the usual, Ricketts Hornpipe, Fisher's Hornpipe etc. I asked the fiddler about where I could find the music with some of these and he said, well, I'll see. The next week, he had a little spiral bound seven by nine book of handwritten tunes, which he gave me.

**Julie Vallimont**

What book was that?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

So that was...it had things...and then he also told me to buy a copy of Cole's 1001 Fiddle Tunes [Cole's 1000 Fiddle Tunes].

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you remember the name of that other book that he gave you? Was it Randy Miller's book?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It was just blank pages that somebody had taken the time to write down.

**Julie Vallimont**

It wasn't a published book?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

It was a spiral bound music notebook.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you still have it?

**Sylvia Miskoe**

I'm pretty sure I still have it, because it's pretty much a treasure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, thank you so much, Sylvia. It's really been a pleasure.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Well, I'm so glad that you invited me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Take care.

**Sylvia Miskoe**

Bye. Bye now.

**Julie Vallimont**

Bye. Bye.

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