**Contra Pulse Episode 31 – Karina Wilson**

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This episode, I sit down with fiddler, teacher, composer, and explorer Karina Wilson. Born into a contradance family, she was dancing to the fiddle in the womb and music and dance have been her north star for her entire life. Growing up she avidly studied classical violin through her childhood and youth and fostered an everlasting love affair with English and contra dance music amidst the rich folk scene of her native New Mexico. She has continued to play traditional music throughout her teen years and adulthood. In her mid-20s, she began dabbling in more contemporary music styles, and she started a self-driven ethnomusicology project in her early 30’s. Today She still plays for contra and ECD working with bands and musicians such as the Gaslight Tinkers, Larry Unger, Jeff Spero, and George Paul. Karina has played for contradances all over the United States and as far away as France, and as a freelance Fiddler she has had the opportunity to work with some incredible musicians at camps and events from coast to coast. In her studies of other musical traditions, she has traveled from Alaska to Puerto Rico, and California to Ukraine, Iceland to Guinea, across three continents and 23 countries in search of the context that surrounds traditional music within each unique culture.

**Julie Vallimont**

Today there’s not much that Karina *doesn’t* do, as long as it involves music. In addition to playing for dances, She teaches and directs a private violin/viola studio, arranges and records for a handful of music studios in northern New Mexico, and performs with multiple groups in Santa Fe including a slightly sacrilegious honky-tonk gospel group, an old-time/blues group, various folk and dance groups, the noted New Mexican/Mexican traditional music group Lone Piñon, and her own international tradfolk group the Big Heart Band.

**Julie Vallimont**

In our Zoom interview Karina and I discuss the New Mexico folk dance and music scene that has been so central in her life, her style as a dance musician, and her musical wanderlust, talking about her relationship with collecting fiddle tunes and learning about different kinds of music and the commonalities between different cultures. Hope you enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello, [Karina Wilson](https://www.facebook.com/karinawilsonmusic/) and welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Karina Wilson**

Oh, thanks, Julie. Thanks for having me.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's so wonderful to see you again.

**Karina Wilson**

It's really wonderful to see you too, you look great.

**Julie Vallimont**

Thanks, from the torso up.

**Karina Wilson**

Right, and like accounting for the camera angles, and everything.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yet another Zoom interview, but the magic of Zoom is that we can talk without having to travel, which is really nice. Where are you right now?

**Karina Wilson**

I'm in Santa Fe, New Mexico, my hometown.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's a magical place. I remember being out there a few years ago and getting to spend time with you and other folks. It's just such a cool town.

**Karina Wilson**

It's really got a lot of deep history, a lot of deep history. I read some books about the history of New Mexico during this pandemic time, and learned some really heartbreaking things that are never talked about, but also a lot of really amazing things about just the geography and where the old roads used to be. The oldest church in North America is here, the oldest settlement that people have been continuously living in is in Taos, so not here, but very close. People have been living in the Taos Pueblo for 2000 years, which is mind boggling for all of us little newbie little Anglos who are dancing around North America.

**Julie Vallimont**

It makes the Nelson contra dance look like a spring chicken.

**Karina Wilson**

All these established things and we're like, wow, they feel so long term. Yeah, the world has changed a lot. It's good to get some perspective.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did you grow up in the folk scene in Santa Fe?

**Karina Wilson**

Yeah, my parents were involved with the contra dance scene here from the beginning and the contra dance scene and the old time scene are really intertwined, less so with the New Mexican folk scene, which I'm starting to learn more about now. I've started working with the band [Lone Piñon](https://www.lonepinon.com/bio). We play almost entirely northern New Mexico, traditional tunes, and dance music. So I'm learning about all these new styles, which is really been fun and interesting. But growing up in the contra dance scene, it was like, I mean, there's only two towns, sort of...three later on, that were having contra dances: Santa Fe, Albuquerque and Taos. You really didn't get that many chances to contra dance. It wasn't like a thing. When I went out to the east, I was really shocked that you could actually have a profession as a contra dance musician, because you could play so much. But here it's like you might be could play once every six weeks or something just between those three. A lot of people were still really involved. It was a really sweet place to grow up. The things that I remember the most, it's funny as a kid, you remember, I used to just sit on the side and watch people's feet on the floor and listen to that. The tunes that the bands were really into were a lot of sort of these, I guess I would think of them in the old time tradition, like Golden Slippers and the typical mega-band tunes. Those always just seem like kind of home in a funny way even though they are like the dorkiest contra dance tunes, I still really love them.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are some other tunes, can you think of others offhand?

**Karina Wilson**

Well, it's like the [Portland Book One](https://www.theportlandcollection.com/) collection, like Road to California, that jig Coffee was really big over here. What else, what else was on my first list? I worked off my first list of tunes for like 10 years. I can't remember very many more but let's see what else was on there. Doon the Brae was one. I don't know, I'm sure they'll come back to me. So growing up here it was a sweet time, a really sweet time. My dad [[Richard Wilson](http://www.merridancing.com/wp/2011/08/farewell-richard-wilson-august-4-2011/)] was a caller, he was really instrumental in building the contra dance community out here. I was a homeschool kid, so I didn't have a lot of social opportunities so my contra dance friends were some of my closest friends. Some of them, most of them are actually out towards you now in Vermont and New Hampshire. But that was just a really sweet time for me, growing up. I started getting into playing for contra dances, I actually started playing for English country dances first, that was more in my alley, I guess because I was studying classical music and the tone and just the sort of general lilting nature of English country was really appealing and easy for me to slide into and get into, so I started doing that. Eventually, when I was a teenager, my dad would do community dances for kids camps in the summer. I went from being the back of the group fiddler to the lead fiddle and over a period of years, and then eventually, we started doing more contra dances around. We went to Oklahoma City once to do some contra dances together. We worked with the Austin contra dance group on one of their weekends in Post, Texas. That was like my first dance weekend I ever played. It was really fun, really sweet to do that with my dad as a team. That really turned my teenage years into something really special and focused also, because it's like, I had a job and kind of like a responsibility that I was stepping into and it made me feel really proud to be a contra dance musician.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's wonderful. So when you were kind of making the transition from classical music to English country dance, and then contra dance fiddling, who were some of your fiddle influences or other influences? Who did you learn from?

**Karina Wilson**

I loved [Bare Necessities](https://www.facebook.com/Bare-Necessities-183265758390140/), I listened to them all the time and tried to play exactly like them. I remember they came when I was like, probably six or something and they did a little tour here in Albuquerque. They played a concert and a dance, and I was like, totally in heaven. Later on, when they did a weekend, maybe about 10 years later, they did a weekend in Oklahoma City and it was like, oh my god, I get to meet them as a musician. It actually formed some friendships that are still, well, I have to check up on them. It really helped when I came out to the east, I rekindled some of those friendships with my Bare Necessities mentors. I still think that they're some of the best musicians.

**Julie Vallimont**

They are, and the best people.

**Karina Wilson**

And the best people, they've really helped me in many ways on my journey. After that, for contra dance musicians, there were some local musicians that I really looked up to. Robin Brown was one of them. She's in the Seattle area now but I saw her on staff at family week at [Lady of the Lake](https://ladyofthelake.org/) and she brought her husband and her kid. That was really cool to see them again after so many years and also being in a different dynamic instead of being the mentor and the mentee. It was like the staff and the camper, which was really fun. It's cool to see how things shift and also just being an adult and interacting with people who were adults when you were younger is like a totally different and very cool thing. I loved Rodney Miller, when he came it changed my whole life with fiddling. I hadn't ever really paid attention, I guess, to people's variations. All of a sudden, I was like, I had known some of his tunes, I was into learning them as a teenager and then watching him, he's got very interesting technique to begin with but watching how he just dances with the tunes and plays with them and to keep the arrangements fresh, instead of having to always play it so close to the original tune. You can have that always and you can branch out and be able to come back. That was really instrumental in my thought process in how to approach traditional music and really just music in general. New Mexico is such an out of the way scene for most of the '90s and into the 2000s, that there weren't really a lot of those typical fiddlers. I'll meet some of my peers now, if I go to different fiddle camps, and they're like, oh, I'm so and so's son. And, like, I don't really know, I have to look them up and they're like pillars of the tradition from the '60s and '70s. I had no idea who they were because New Mexico was so far out there in terms of travel, that in the '90s, nobody was really coming here. So I'm still learning about the tradition and trying to get the story straight and who the fiddlers were and where the music comes from. That's been a really big quest of mine for the last number of years is to track not only the general regions and styles of tunes, but actually get down to who wrote them and what tradition they're coming from and if they're borrowed, because contra dance borrows a lot of music, from different places, which I love. I think it's great, because it's such an active tradition. But trying to really follow the lines and appreciate the tunes all the way back to their conception rather than just like, using them for my own ends right now.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like when we play a tune for a contra dance, even if we play it in a contra style, it's useful and interesting to go back to the tradition that it came from and learn to hear it in its own way, even if we've changed it a lot. Even if it was a hornpipe and we play it as a reel, or if we've sped it up or changed its entire ornamentation or whatever, dropped a bunch of notes from it, whatever we've done to it. It doesn't mean that we can't play it our way in a contra dance. I think taking some tunes and "contrafying" them makes them danceable for us. But it's so cool to see where it came from.

**Karina Wilson**

It also gives them a little bit of life. Like, for a lot of these tunes, if they only stayed in the tradition where they were born, then a lot of people would never hear them and I feel like eventually, that's the way that music dies, it sort of runs out of appreciation, or it gets shelved and people forget about it, but if it's used and passed around and appreciated throughout different genres it passes on the tradition or almost preserves it in a way even though it's changing the tune. I don't know, it's an interesting conundrum.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are some of these tunes that you've been looking into? Do you know any off the top of your head?

**Karina Wilson**

Lately I've been really interested in balfolk music and French music and Scandinavian music. I did an online workshop with this Belgian fiddler. I was just looking at the music, I transcribed it and it's a minuet, no, it's a gavotte from the early 1700s, from Amsterdam, but it has this really great, like groovy feel, and I feel like this would be a perfect example of a tune that would be able to cross over and suddenly it's going from like a gavotte to a bourree feel and then from this bourree to or not a bouree...this sort of schottische feel. I feel like it could totally work in contra dance music. That's just one example of one like that. Other tunes would be say, like old time tunes. Contra dance was not a typical Southern style of dancing, square dancing is more of a typical style of dancing. And so, the phrasing is different with the calls and the purpose and old time tunes can be crooked and then straightened out for contra is one thing or French Canadian tunes. Things that would be like a quadrille can be simplified and straightened out to make into one that works for a contra dance form.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sometimes you can do that and the tune still stays good.

**Karina Wilson**

Sometimes, it's hit or miss, but I think it depends on the musicians that you're playing with also. You get the groove. You can maneuver it just right and sometimes like, just can't find the feel.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's one of the things that leads to contra music having such a diversity and all these new bands and new compositions and new albums is that I feel like a lot of us have this mindset of like, oh, that tune would work well for a contra dance. It's almost like we're all subconsciously listening to everything, and mentally trying to fit it into a contra dance even if we mean it, or not. Sometimes I'm like, is that wrong? But I can't help it, it's just like this subconscious habit.

**Karina Wilson**

It's so ingrained, that dancing is so joyful and so ingrained, and it's also like this very intuitive form with the phrasing and the way that it fits and how long it goes and when it repeats. You feel this sort of, I don't know, this backbone all the time. It's like a sentence structure almost. It just feels like that. That's sort of how I also interpret music. When I'm playing Swedish music, and the phrases, they feel a little extra long and have a little fancy turnaround and then the next phrase is shortened. I feel like it's a base understanding of, I mean, what am I trying to say? It's a base knowledge that then helps me sort of digest the other music instead of coming from nothing.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like, every tradition has its own rhythm and cadence. That's just how the tunes go just like when you're learning a new language. The first thing you hear before you even understand the words is just the rhythm of the sentences and how the words fit together and that can feel really comforting.

**Karina Wilson**

It gives you sort of like a pillar, or a place, or like an anchor to go from.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's so cool. What were the dances in Santa Fe, like, when you were a kid? How are they different now?

**Karina Wilson**

Well, when I was a kid, it felt like they were huge. It felt like the room was always packed. Everybody was always so joyful and like really close, and there'd be these giant jam parties. It was just a really active, lively scene. And then what happened for a while, it felt like a lot of people drifted away from the contra dance scene. Now it feels like there's a whole new resurgence of people that are my age or younger but they don't have any connection to the older group scene of people that I grew up with. It's kind of sad actually to think that all that history is sort of lost because it wasn't well preserved at the time. There's a brave young soul who's trying to write the history of contra dance. But he's sort of writing it from his perspective, which is now or like five years ago on till now and I did talk to some musicians the other day from back in the day, my early mentors, and they were saying "It's really too bad they don't know anyone. They don't know Mimi Stewart they don't know, Gary Papenhagen They don't know your dad, they don't know..." It's like all these people who have passed on. We kind of took it for granted that they would be there and that the stories were just sort of happening in the moment. I didn't take it as they had the gravitas or that they were actually history in the making. It was sort of casual. Like, oh, we're just getting together and Kelly's always here. But now, I wish there had been somebody who is sort of like, keeping track of the stories and there is in Mexican culture, they have for Dia de los Muertos, they have the altars with all the pictures of the people who have passed, and I wish we had one for the contra dances because it'd be so neat just to see all of the elders and be able to follow the lines back and not just think like, oh, we're the first ones or whatever. It's funny, because it's such an old, deep tradition for us immigrants that it feels like there should be more honoring of the people who have come before us.

**Julie Vallimont**

We may have memorials for individual people sometimes when they pass. I remember when Warren Argo passed away and then there were lots of moments where we would play his tunes, or people would honor him in some way. But there's no like central place, so to speak, where we put the names of all these folks. [David Kaynor](https://www.davidkaynor.com/) has [recently passed away](https://blog.folkschool.org/2021/06/03/remembering-david-kaynor/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=remembering-david-kaynor). I think that's a good example of the strangeness of communities and traditions where I felt like this too, when I was an up and coming musician, and I was coming into a community that had been created by a previous generation of musicians. It just feels indestructible. It feels so rich and vibrant, and incredible and it is. It transcends the people who create it. But then also, it surprisingly relies on them a lot. Like there are some people who are the lifeblood of a community in so many different ways. When they disappear for a variety of reasons, either they pass away, or they leave the tradition, or they don't play anymore, whatever it is, there can be a big void there. It doesn't take much to lose that transmission to the next group of people who come along and want to do the activity, it's crazy. You already said this. I'm just saying things you've already said, I wish I had a more succinct term for this thing that can happen. It's so easy to take them for granted. The community is thriving, because of certain people, and we don't always see the invisible work that they do or the little roots, and the glue and the welcoming spirit that they send out.

**Karina Wilson**

Without the, the storytellers, those people will totally get forgotten and nobody knows that mantle needs to be picked up again and what that job entails.

**Julie Vallimont**

You might not even know there was a mantle without someone to tell you, and it's very easy for that to happen. That's partly why I wanted to start this podcast in the first place. I initially approached [CDSS](http://www.cdss.org) because I wanted to do a book about contra dance piano. Because I felt like some of the older styles of piano were disappearing, and that it's not going to take that long for it to be gone and for there to be no transmission of this mantle that we're passing on. We kind of morphed it around and changed formats because of COVID and everything, and now it's a podcast where I get to talk to all sorts of people.

**Karina Wilson**

Wow, what a great idea, Julie.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, it's been really fun for me, I'm the one who gets to talk to all you folks. I don't know, how do we collect all these stories, there are lots of historians in the contra dance community. But I feel like there's a special fun...that we can do...I'm not a historian, I don't try to pretend to be, I'm terrible at remembering names or years or details or anything. I'm terrible at remembering anything. What I like to do and what I feel like we as musicians can do is learn the stories behind the tunes and pass them down, and learn who the tunes have passed through to get to us. It's fun, I love...anytime I would hear a tune, you know, you're like at 4am at some amazing session at a camp and you're just jamming your brains out, and everybody's super tired, and you learn a new tune. And then later, you're like, what was that? I don't know what it was called, or whatever. The next day you go find the person who started it. It used to be like, what's the name of that tune? And now, I would be like, what is that tune and where did you learn from and then find out where they learned it from, and then find out where that person learned it from. Maybe that person got it from a record, and then go read the liner notes of the record, it's just a fun game to see how far back you can trace these tunes.

**Karina Wilson**

It really is, and sometimes you can see in the way the tune is shaped, where it's coming from, and this migration. I've been so inspired by this idea of musical migration as telling the history of people. So like that perfect example, contra dance music. Take a tune that comes from Cape Breton. Cape Breton tunes, traveled through the whalers from Scotland and Ireland. So you trace it back that way. When I was in Ireland, some of the tunes I'd be like, oh, I know this tune and I'd play it and they would be missing a part or it would be a little bit different shaped and you'd be like, oh, interesting how that all kind of works out. It's been so interesting, I've learned, recently learned, about the Métis fiddle tradition, which is the Canadian half indigenous, half fur trapper offspring. They have tunes that are French based, and Irish and Scottish based, because those are the people who were coming over to try to find the work and they brought their tunes, and then this planting of these tunes in Canada was growing this whole new tradition. You can still sort of follow it and it tells the story of the times and what people are going through and what they needed to do to survive. I've been really interested in following that through a lot of different traditions. I went around Europe after I was playing with this Irish band and that ended and I took myself on a wander because I had all this Euro.

**Julie Vallimont**

A good excuse to wander.

**Karina Wilson**

I had all this time off because I had been planting my attention garden over there. My attention garden over here was totally gone to seed and I just had all this free time to look for my next goal, I guess. I went traveling and I ended up finding, in Poland I found a cellist, a street musician, who's from Moldova, and he was playing with a Ukrainian guy playing bagpipes. They had all these tunes that were Galician and ancient Ukrainian tunes. It was from the kingdom of Galicia, which was part of Ukraine and Poland before the world wars. They were playing Spanish Galician tunes and then Eastern European Galician tunes and then they were also playing French tunes and all these balfolk tunes. I learned about this ethno community that stretches across all of Europe pretty much and it's people like us who are trying to bring back the traditions and the cultural identities of different people.

**Karina Wilson**

The tracing and sharing of tunes, another really good example of that is tango music, and how Argentina, when we think of Argentinian traditional music, we pretty much only think of tango, even though tango music is really only from Buenos Aires. Outside of Buenos Aires, there's a lot of other traditional music and dance. The invention of tango came with immigrants from Europe, coming and working in Argentina, because there was work there. There were wars in Spain and France and at the time, and so they were coming to where the work was. They developed this style of playing and then Argentina had a civil war. A lot of these people came back and reintroduced the tango music that had been created there with this combination of European and Argentinian traditional music, they brought it back to Europe. It changed again and exploded. Now there's tangos from Belgium, there's tangos from France, there's tangos from Ukraine, and you can hear how the traditional music of the place has influenced this new style of tango, this, like European explosion of tango. It's crazy, because it's all sort of influenced by the political climate at the time, and where the work was, and what was happening with people's safety and livelihoods and human migration, which is crazy.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, just studying all these different traditions and dabbling in them and meeting people from them is just so great, because there's just this commonality to a lot of human cultures in the ways that we like to come together and celebrate and burn off steam and get to know each other and what you do after a day of work. I think, especially in mainstream American culture, where, this is all so trite because we all know it, but I feel like it's worth talking about anyway. We've become kind of detached from music in our daily lives. We all know this, this isn't anything revolutionary. For so many of us, contra music is this way to reconnect with music in our daily lives. It's like a place where you can go dance every week. There are a lot of cultures where they just dance every week. It's literally what they do all around the world. But in our weird immigrant workaholic culture, Puritanical culture, we have somehow managed to go through life without dancing, except maybe the Electric Slide, at your cousin's wedding, or your awkward high school prom, like I did. I only danced in the privacy of my own house when I was a kid, with my friends to Madonna and that was it or like awkward ballet lessons. I didn't grow up in this amazing tradition like you and like other folks, right? I've just always been interested in applied things, like music can be an art form and it is, and that's incredible. But also, music is an applied form of living daily life. That's why I started out as a church musician, when I was a kid, and in my teens, and then throughout my 20s, because I was like, this is music with a purpose that means something in people's everyday lives. Even though I came to a point where that didn't resonate with me in the same way in my life. Discovering dance music, it's not exactly the same purpose, of course, but it's very similar. It scratches the same itch, so to speak, making music that resonated in people's lives. So hearing tunes and their stories of human migration, like you're talking about and just the daily lives of people and where people go and what they do and what they're interested in. I don't know. It's just so fascinating.

**Karina Wilson**

Yeah, it is. It is a funny place, music has a funny place in our culture, because like you said it was so under appreciated for so long. It was seen as very frivolous and only super lazy people wanted to play music or it was done at the end of everything when your hands have been tired from working all day. It wasn't used as the art form that it is now or it can be now. And to me, music, to me, feels like everything, mostly because it is everything to me. It's my whole way of making a living. Really, it's like the basis of almost all of my friendships and social interactions, they all tie back somehow to music and how it brings people together and how you can communicate in a different way. Because it's really saying the unspeakable things. Not unspeakable, like terrible, horrible things that you shouldn't ever say. It's like things we just don't have words for like the, the sweet sentiments and the different layers of emotion and human consciousness and conditioning. It can express all of these things and ties back into a way to deal with your emotions in a healthy way, a way to just be more of a human being and less of a workaholic robot.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm aware of the irony of a podcast in which we're using words to talk about music, which is the unspeakable thing. We're aware of that irony, but we're limited by this format. And also, music reaches the brain, it affects the brain in ways that words don't, we all have different regions of the brain that process speech, that process music, that process visuals, smells, touch. As a contra musician, I was always really interested in working kind of on a subliminal level a lot of the time. We all have this groove engine inside us that responds to rhythm that we don't have to talk about or think about and you don't need words to articulate a good fiddle shuffle. Anybody can respond to that, or a good drum beat and then good chord phrasing, a good bassline. And then if you have other subliminal things that just go to that part of our brain, we can get to these deep trance-like states which also helps enhance our feeling of community because we're all coming together in that way.

**Karina Wilson**

And you, as a dancer, you sort of become a musician in that sense of like, you are interacting with the music the same as the musicians are. I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but when you're really in the pocket, in the zone, as a musician, or as a dancer, it's sort of like, you become weightless and everything. It's like, you're not driving yourself anymore. Something else, the greater whole, I'm not sure what it is, but it's doing all of the work for you. And you get to just, like, float on the sound waves or something...I'm not sure what it is.

**Julie Vallimont**

I find that's often when cool ideas come out musically, like some really inspired moment. I don't know, most of us aren't thinking, what chord should I play there that would sound really cool and surprising? That's never gonna go well, right? Most of the time the most inspiring things just come out of us. And just like when you're dancing, and you lose yourself in the dance, and all of a sudden your body is moving itself. Even in a contra dance I feel like there's some times when we're like, should I twirl this person? Would they think it's cool? How do I...you know? Am I late for this hey, oh, no, where am I? You know, versus like when you're in the flow of the dance, and all of a sudden, you're twirling and spinning and it just comes out of you.

**Karina Wilson**

It just comes out and you're right there. Oh, that's so good.

**Julie Vallimont**

And musically, when that comes out, it's building on all the building blocks of all the things we've ever heard or learned or studied or taken in. So it comes out in whatever musical language you happen to speak or languages you happen to speak.

**Karina Wilson**

So like your Madonna groove comes out.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you've been playing for contra dances for a long time...

**Karina Wilson**

I have been playing a long time.

**Julie Vallimont**

How has your fiddling changed over the years, just like in terms of anything, like maybe what tunes you're playing? What tunes are you interested in? How you work with callers, what you're thinking of as a dance fiddler? Any of those kinds of things.

**Karina Wilson**

Well, my playing has changed. I feel like my playing changes with age. When I was a young fiddler, I was really, really into fancy fast tunes and as I've been getting older, I've been less driven by that desire to play as many notes as possible or the most interesting, strange, shaped tunes that have, like, the surprises in them. I feel like really what's been appealing to me is the older things and a melody that's more simplistic in terms of how many notes they're using to get to the points. Because I feel like there's just more space, if they're a little bit more luscious, you can just kind of, I don't know, get to know the tunes a little bit better when they have all this age behind them also. I don't know, it's funny to think about it like, okay, let's, let's distill it down to what it is, and how I've changed. I have noticed that as I've gotten more into a broader variety of tunes, I really have started to work more towards the oldest edges of the tradition, I feel like. Those are the ones that really catch me and then you can play them forever without getting bored. Whereas some of the fancier tunes, it's harder to find variations because it's all spelled out and everything is like exactly every 16th note is there, given to you, spoon fed. It feels like almost a betrayal of the tunes to change those and it's easy to fall off and it's hard to find the natural shape, they're sort of like these bodybuilder tunes. Whereas the other tunes are a little bit like, you have some give and take and, so that's been a surprising and interesting thing that I've noticed in my playing. But also, as I get into other genres of dance music outside of contra dance it's made me appreciate dancing and tradition a lot more if that makes any sense. I used to be really drawn to northern styles and kind of turn away from the southern styles of playing. A few years ago, I was in the band called the [Broomdust Caravan](https://www.facebook.com/Broomdust-Caravan-117837298288426/), which is a local sort of jam band. The other fiddler in that band came from the West Texas swing style and learning from him and learning his take on how to swing the beat and how to get into the groove so that it fits that sort of jazzy style that comes a little bit more from like it's a little bit closer related to Cajun music and blues music. It sort of draws on all these other traditions rather than just old time and New England and Quebecois and Irish tunes, it has like a totally different feel. Working with him totally, really opened my eyes to the beauty of Southern music, old time music, and Cajun music and all these things that I had sort of been like, oh, it all sounds the same. I really noticed that I really need somebody who's already interested in a tradition to sort of open the door for me before I can really appreciate the tradition and kind of see the beauty in it. I hate to say that because it makes me realize what a snobby little musician I was, but it really has. That's been a really delightful part of my musical journey and opening up is really being introduced to new styles in a way where I suddenly get it, whereas before I never would have come to it on my own.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think there's something to be said about kind of seeing something from the inside and having someone to show you that. It's like if you go to a country as a tourist, versus if you stay with someone in a country who lives there can show you around and what the real fabric of life is all about. It's a totally different experience.

**Karina Wilson**

A completely different experience.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think most traditions are lovable once you connect with them and so it helps to have that connection with the person to help you connect with them, it's really cool. I remember we were in Santa Fe a few years ago, playing a dance weekend and then again, on tour. I loved it so much. I wanted to come back. And so [Buddy System](https://buddysystemband.com/) was booked for a dance weekend in Colorado. And we said, it's that close? That's close. Right? Relatively speaking. We wrote to the people in New Mexico and we're like, will any of you have us for anything, do you have dances going on? Because they're not so frequent that it was a given that things would be lining up date wise. I remember we got to go to Albuquerque and Santa Fe and we went to hear one of your bands at a bar in downtown Santa Fe. I think it was just so cool hearing like a whole other side of your musicianship that night.

**Karina Wilson**

Thanks. Yeah, I think that was the Broomdust Caravan that I was just referencing. Oh, my god, that was really fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

And that bar was really vibey, it felt like old Santa Fe, you know?

**Karina Wilson**

A total hole in the wall. Yeah, it's been, it's been a strange time, because all of those places were shut down. But now the governor just announced that in a few days we'll be at 60% vaccinated people, and there'll be no restrictions at all anymore and everything is like, oohhh! It's gonna be a very busy summer.

**Julie Vallimont**

Does that mean you get all your bar gigs back?

**Karina Wilson**

I have quite a few. There's a lot that I'm not taking back. After the shutdown, I decided that I want to really kind of prioritize my time and my efforts and kind of point everything in a direction that I want to pursue instead of just sort of being like, I want to learn how to play with every musician out there, and how to talk to everyone. That's been very educational for me, because I've learned a lot about theory that I never had that even just from, from untrained musicians, they have a way of understanding and just how learning how everyone that you're working with how they relate to the music that you're trying to make together, makes it so that you just have a broader knowledge of all the different aspects that music is. So music theory was something that I was never ever taught. I didn't hear about the circle of fifths until I was almost out of high school. I had been studying classical and orchestra and doing that for like, 15 years at that point. It blew my mind. I was like, what are you talking about when one of my conductors is like, the circle of fifths. I had no idea what that even meant at all. And so it's been this constant pursuit for me of how do chords fit together? How do you go from one to the other? What is really happening here? Because I had no way of talking about it or understanding it at all, all I had was melody and melody, how to play melody and how to spin melody and I had no basis of like, how to support melody. So that's been a really interesting thing as I'm maturing as a musician. Going back to your question of, then versus now, that's been a really wonderful journey also is learning just basically, theory and then trying to teach my own students a way into it from a melodic point of view. Just trying to really work it into my own playing and always know, I think of music as in like, an ocean. So the melody is at the top, but there's all these things happening underneath, the rhythm, the chordal structures that are moving along and I've always just been sort of like the boat on top of the ocean. But to really, really be able to understand what is supporting it and how to be there. It's been really interesting and hard. It's been very challenging and I still have a long way to go. But yeah, trying to fill in the gaps.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of these things you've internalized like the circle of fifths. For our listeners who don't know what that means, it's just a way that chords move in a way that makes sense harmonically and you just know it when you hear it. If you think of "Amen" [Julie sings amen] or whatever, that's a typical progression along the circle of fifths, it's everywhere. Pop songs, every pop song ever. It's a Small World goes from the I chord to the V chord, it's just so natural that sometimes we internalize them, we don't have the words for them. But then, once we learn the harmonic structure, it helps us understand it and apply it in a whole new way, once you understand the theory behind it.

**Karina Wilson**

In a way it takes the mystery and the magic out, but then it actually puts more magic in like, how can this be? How can this be like across the board? How can every song use these chords and still sound different? How can that possibly be? It's almost more magical after you learn about it, even though it's putting it into, like a scientific form instead of breaking it down to its elements.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's only a few chords and a few major chord progressions, and yet we come up with all this infinite variety of melody and song. Some people say every song has already been written. But yet, little motifs change and travel around and get broken up in our subconscious and come out in other places, that's funny.

**Karina Wilson**

And there are things, how can every tune be written when you hear something new all the time?

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember learning about modes when I started playing for contra, because before I played for contra dances I played jazz and folk music and pop music and classical music, and so I was familiar with all those different kinds of chord progressions and patterns. But one thing I was not used to was being in the key of A major and having a G major chord in it, it just blew my mind. It had this sound, it was so exotic to me, like playing Star of Munster even I was like, this is in A minor and someone was politely like, well, not really. I remember in high school, I tried to learn music theory as much as I could, I was in jazz band, but my brain doesn't really like thinking about theory all the time. But, okay, geek moment. I grew up listening to a lot of classic rock, where I grew up, and a lot of Rush, listened to a lot of Rush. I am outing myself as a nerd. I remember reading interviews with Rush and Alex Lifeson and Geddy Lee would always talk about the compositions and Alex Lifeson was in Guitar Magazine. I used to read Guitar Magazine, I don't know why. Because I'm a nerd. And they're always, Alex, how did you come up with this guitar solo for XYZ? And he's like, well, I use a lot of mixolydian and phrygian scales, and I was like, what is he talking about? I was like, I should study mixolydian mode. But it all just sounded like gibberish to me, and very complex and very sophisticated and very complicated, which is how their music often sounded. And then I was like, oh, wait, in in the context of trad music, a lot of it is in mixolydian mode but it's for a very organic reason. It's because a lot of it is written on diatonic instruments that don't have every chromatic note of a major scale. Once I realized that I was like, oh, this is not complicated at all, this is really beautifully simple.

**Karina Wilson**

Totally. It makes so much sense in the context but then it's taken out and applied to pop music, and it suddenly doesn't make sense anymore.

**Julie Vallimont**

If you have a button accordion and you're playing in the key of A major, but you don't have a G natural, I mean, a G sharp, sorry, I said that backwards. You don't have a G sharp, then you're going to put G naturals in your tune and all of a sudden, that becomes the mode that you're operating in. All of a sudden mixolydian mode, dorian mode, phrygian mode, things that we don't normally encounter a lot in western music, l well, that's Western music, too. You know what I mean, classically based defines itself as the center of the universe kind of Western music. Like technically Star of Munster is in A Dorian, but then it's not really A because it doesn't start on the A note of the scale. We could go down that road but it doesn't matter.

**Karina Wilson**

It's much easier just to play the tune and then.....

**Julie Vallimont**

Just play A's and G's, A minors and G's.

**Karina Wilson**

Sometimes the words make it more complicated than it needs to be.

**Julie Vallimont**

I just remember realizing that all these diatonic instruments like bagpipes, certain kinds of accordions. Lots of other examples that are just, sometimes pennywhistles, all these different things are affecting the kind of music that gets written and played.

**Karina Wilson**

One of my pandemic projects was to start learning the n'goni, which is an African harp, but it's a pentatonic scale. It's my first experience playing with the strictly pentatonic scale.

**Julie Vallimont**

Which is a five note scale. I love the sound of the pentatonic scale, and I naturally gravitate towards tunes that sound pentatonic. I just love it.

**Karina Wilson**

It's an ancient scale but it's so ingrained in our DNA, it seems like it's one of the most familiar sounds and melodies that are based on the pentatonic scale are usually the ones that get stuck in your head or the most accessible for non musicians to latch on to. It's ancient and you really feel it in your everything, in your DNA and your mitochondria or whatever it is.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you have any fiddle tunes that you love...that...I mean, most fiddle tunes are not purely pentatonic, but a lot of them kind of hang out in pentatonic land for a lot of their time. Do you have any examples of tunes like that? Let's see. You can get out your fiddle if you want.

**Karina Wilson**

So let's see. I got my fiddle worked on. I have fine tuners now. It's made a huge difference, I'm so happy. Let's see, so a pentatonic tune. So a pentatonic scale is basically like a blues scale. So what's a, what's a tune? I feel like [Larry Unger](https://www.larryunger.net/) writes a lot of pentatonic tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, he's played a lot of blues music.

**Karina Wilson**

And banjo also.

**Julie Vallimont**

Banjo lends itself to those.

**Karina Wilson**

So his tune Sweetbriar seems like a pentatonic tune, mostly. [fiddle playing]

**Julie Vallimont**

Whereas if you contrast that with a tune, that's more just like straight up major using the circle of fifths a lot, like, I don't know. So many of them, like all the others.

**Karina Wilson**

So it's like melodies, but you're only using one, two, three, four, five notes and then it repeats. So there's a good use of the pentatonic. Let's see. What's a good major one that would be familiar, like Reconciliation [plays Reconciliation] Even though that's kind of using the same sort of pentatonic thing also.

**Julie Vallimont**

The B part is less pentatonic.

**Karina Wilson**

Here let me start this up. Off the record, here we go [plays tune]

**Julie Vallimont**

Siobhan O'Donnell's

**Karina Wilson**

Yes, it's blocking me. I hate that. I feel like so many times my tune recollection is like a gumball machine. I can't get to the one until I play the one that's jamming all the other tunes out of the way.

**Julie Vallimont**

How about Frank's Reel, similar to Reconciliation, but different.

**Karina Wilson**

But different. Let's see, Frank's Reel. What's the first bar? [fiddle playing] Good example of a major tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Has a lot of motion on the scale, has all the notes in it.

**Karina Wilson**

Every single note, I love it.

**Julie Vallimont**

So when you are playing for a dance, what...what's going through your head? Or your body or your fiddle? What is your role as a dance fiddler, for you?

**Karina Wilson**

It depends on who I'm playing with. I feel like the job of the dance fiddler is to want to sort of be on the same wavelength as the caller and to pick the tunes that fit the shape of the evening, instead of just the shape of the dance that they're working on. Depending on who I'm playing with, since I don't work with one specific band all the time, and I work with different accompaniment players it usually depends on who the accompaniment is, or what way the tunes are interpreted. I can work with, let's say when I work with Larry Unger, I have this idea when a caller is like, oh, we want a smooth piece or we want a bouncy piece. Those are two adjectives that are thrown around a lot. I feel like they're very open to interpretation, even though everyone acts like they're very strict. Because when I play with Larry, and when I play with [Jeff Spero](http://www.jeffreyspero.com/) it's like completely opposite their interpretations of the same tune. They fit in both categories. Like Maison de Glace or no, let's say like, Rose in the Heather, a jig [hums tune] I can't think of tunes unless I have my fiddle. So that tune, I always feel as a very smooth...the way that I want to dance it is dances that have a lot of forwards and backs and things that you're sort of like an allemande where you're kind of just drifting and flowing into all these different moves, without a lot of percussion. There's some that kind of come like this and then go around but mostly it's sort of this feel rather than like this driving feel. When a caller would ask for a smooth piece when I'm playing with Larry, I feel like that's one that I would typically play. I noticed the contrast with Jeff because he thinks of that tune as a bouncy tune, like...It's not always the fiddler's role to define the tunes, it's more the rhythm section to define the tune. As a contra dance fiddler, I kind of feel like your whole job is just to spark the imagination of the dancer, like getting them into the space where they're not really even listening to the music, they're just feeling it. There are variations that you can do but if you do too many variations, then I feel like you're looking a little too internally and a little bit too much like for your own gratification, rather than playing for the dance and playing...

**Julie Vallimont**

There's a certain amount of variation that's intuitive, right? Like, it's intuitive to the dancers, where they still recognize it as the tune and they don't lose their place when they hear it and it's intuitive for you, and it feels like natural. Versus that feeling when we're trying too hard, which all of us have done at various times, trying to be clever, or or just pushing ourselves out of boredom. I have moments where I'm like, I'm gonna try this chord progression right now, whether the dancers like it or not, and whether or not it serves the dance. I try not to do that a lot. But we all do indulge that once in a while if we want to learn, explore, keep ourselves from getting stale.

**Karina Wilson**

Right like, oh, I heard these guys do it, I want to do it, too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you worry about things like tempo or phrasing?

**Karina Wilson**

Oh, yeah, for sure. Those are always big things that I kind of worry about, especially tempo. I don't know if it's my own playing, but I always feel like whoever I'm playing with is usually speeding up and it's probably my own fault. Because I feel like they're just responding to my energetic vibe. So it's just sort of like always building. I have noticed that a lot that it's really hard to stay at the right tempo, it's really hard. Even if you're playing with a drummer, who is watching the tempo on their iPhone app, or whatever, it's still he can see all this fluctuation. I feel like some of that is good, feeling some fluctuation, you have to let it breathe, and when everybody is in it together, then hopefully it's not too distracting, but sometimes I think it really does get distracting as a dancer, and as a musician. Mostly I worry about making the transitions in the melodies without having it crash. So, since I'm not a full time contra dance musician, tune recollection is a really big anxiety for me. Especially when in the middle of a tune, if I don't have it there on the page in front of me because usually the way that I remember a tune is not from the beginning of the tune, it's usually at the end of the tune or somewhere in the middle and then I have to work my way around back to the beginning. So it makes it really stressful to say hey, I'm getting ready, there's one more time, how does this tune go?

**Julie Vallimont**

What do you do to jog your memory?

**Karina Wilson**

Usually I have it written down, like the first bars of the tune, I have a little cheat sheet but I also, I rely heavily on my bandmates. Sometimes they'll try to start singing the tune from where it lines up with the tune that I'm already playing like singing it in my mind trying to get back to the beginning of the tune in time to catch the beginning of the tune and during the switch. Sometimes you come up with a fancy transition that helps get you there. If you aren't playing with a with a consistent group, then that's a little trickier.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, for so long the quote unquote, "sit in band" has been the norm. You know what I mean? That's what most contra music has been. In total, of course, there's lots of traditional bands that have had band leaders and members and a certain prescribed repertoire. But when you look at how common bands are today, it's almost like you are a fun oddball in a way for being a really great fiddler who doesn't have a regular permanent contra band that you tour with and things like that. But I'm not gonna say anything's the traditional way because if we've learned anything, that doesn't mean anything. That's like, a way it's been done a lot, is not having a band and just playing with different pickup musicians. Was that always what the scene was like, when you were growing up in New Mexico?

**Karina Wilson**

Pretty much, there were a few bands. There are a couple bands that have...are still going from when I was a kid like Sweet Nell or the Red Hot Chili Peppers, no, not the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

**Julie Vallimont**

They have been around for a while.

**Karina Wilson**

The Adobe brothers? No, I'm definitely over caffeinated or something is not working right. There were some bands that have continued but a lot of the music seems like it was pickup bands or short lived bands. There was a band that I liked when I was growing up that was a crossover English and contra dance band and it was like eight people and there was classical musicians in it. There was a piano and a guitar and a cello and viola and a fiddler and a flute and all this stuff is great, it's called Half Gypsy, which now is an inappropriate term. But at the time, I thought it was a brilliant name and I loved them. They were sort of like, a band, but everybody else seemed like it was pretty much pick up bands and that's pretty much how it's been. For a while I was working with a pianist and we were like, Karina and Della. We did every contra dance that we got, we played together, pretty much. She also was the pianist for the Mega band and every pickup band that there was in northern New Mexico. So it has been a lot of pick up bands, or you get together for one rehearsal and go over some repertoire and then you're like, okay, we're ready for the dance and we play for the dance. For a while, I felt like that was the local level way of doing it. But, it seems for me to have continued a little bit to the national level way of doing it. I've really kind of just been doing it because, let's say, Larry Unger who was one of the players that I am able to go and play nationally with, he needed me because he was running a marathon and was sort of tying a contra dance in at the same time in Arizona. I was sort of the regional fiddler that they decided to call. It's still in a way like this sort of hometown pickup band vibe, even though it's with a national player. When I go and I play with [George Paul](https://georgepaulmusic.com/) or Jeff Spero it's that same thing of, okay, we're just gonna smash it together and see what happens and hopefully we have enough common repertoire.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's three very different rhythm players to play with, Larry Unger, Jeff Spero and with George Paul...very different styles. Even though George and Jeff are both piano players, their styles are very different from each other. Jeff's is kind of pop influenced and kind of groovy and George's is kind of more blues rock. I don't know what he would call it, I don't want to put words into anybody's mouth, but a lot of riffs and basslines and gospely moments. Sorry, Jeff and George, I just did a terrible job describing your piano styles. In my defense, it's really late at night for me, it's a lame excuse, but we had to work through the time difference, and I lost. That'll be my excuse. It must bring out totally different sides of your fiddling to play with each of those people.

**Karina Wilson**

I feel like George brings a lot more Latin flavor to a lot of his stuff. He likes to branch out in a lot of different directions, in that sense, and brings in all these different sounds and isn't afraid to use the patches on his keyboard to bring out...let's do a steel drum sound and make it fun and interesting for the dancers that way. It's a blast to dance to his playing, because it's so varied and you never know what's going to come out or the groove that's going to come out or what it brings out in your own body movement. And Jeff, he comes from such a, I don't know, his playing always just feel so elegant and sort of transcendent, it's a totally different style.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then Larry has this kind of distinctive sense of rhythm to his playing.

**Karina Wilson**

I love the way that Larry plays with that, his beats are so defined. Maybe it's because he's guitar versus piano or banjo versus piano but he has such a strong stroke. There's no it doesn't sort of like, when I try to play guitar you can hear all of the notes. But he's like exact, it's just like one hit every time. I'm not sure exactly how to describe it.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's tight and not ambiguous.

**Karina Wilson**

I like that he usually is the one to start off a dance. I feel like that's generally a fiddler's job. Like, okay, here's the potatoes [hums old time fiddle rhythm] but he goes like, chug, chug, chug and he's got a great feel for it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you have any favorite tunes at the moment that you like that you would want to play?

**Karina Wilson**

Contra dance tunes or anything? Yeah, I do actually have a lot of, maybe I'll play for you some of the things that I learned when I was traveling in Europe.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that'd be really fun.

**Karina Wilson**

There's this beautiful, really, really beautiful piece called Bloodmoon that I learned from this cellist Martin Neaga ... It's a modern Swedish tune written by this guy, Mats Nystam.... It's in the form of a polska or a waltz. It's in three, but it doesn't start on the downbeat. Here I'll just play it for you. [Plays tune on fiddle]

**Julie Vallimont**

That's beautiful.

**Karina Wilson**

That's one of my favorite tunes. That tune, I have my iPhone recording almost every time we were playing and he played that and then I learned it and then I played it with this other woman from Austria, from Vienna. She played it in a totally different key than Martin Neaga did. And she was like, Martin, he's always changing everything. It's been fun to learn that little tune. I did a video with this little group of people that I've been playing with here, we recorded that tune in a video and I went on this whole mission to try to contact Matt... I didn't even really know his name or anything but I found him on Facebook, social media makes that stuff way easier. I found him on Facebook and we were able to have a conversation and he actually liked the video that I was asking permission to put out with his tune in it and he's like, oh, it's beautiful, it's great. So that felt good. So that's like a modern one. I've been learning, I mentioned this band Lone Piñon that I've been working with that's playing New Mexican and Mexican music. Because of them I've been learning about all these cunas and inditas and all things from New Mexico. I've also learned about this Mexican fiddler named Juan Reynoso who comes from the Michoacan region. I fell in love with these pasodobles that he has written. I've been really jamming out to these pasodobles. I can play one [Juan Reynoso](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juan_Reynoso_Portillo) for you right now. They're a little bit, a totally different feel. Let's see [plays tune] So that's just the introduction And then here comes the tune [plays tune]. So they have a very different structure, it would go back to the introduction part there, and then play the A part again and then there's a C part so learning these tunes in different structures is really interesting also, instead of just having it like AA, BB, maybe CC part, like form, it's very cinematic, it feels like.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm not an expert on the pasodobles, but I remember it's the dance you always see on shows like Dancing with the Stars, Spanish dance where they're reenacting the bull fight. I just think of it being associated with bullfighting.

**Karina Wilson**

That's what it feels like, every time I learn one. There's one from the town where I grew up, Pecos. It's been really fun to learn music from the region that I know so well, even though I didn't learn it directly from musicians who are living there. It really feels important to me to learn these tunes, but like the pasodobles, it's funny because it does seem like such a ballroom kind of fancy, choreographed dance, but these are traditional tunes, and they're used for these folk dances and so it's like the minuet. Minuet, I always think of is like the minuets I learned when I was in classical music like the Suzuki book one where you're like [hums tune] and it's very classical. Those are all based in, minuets are still danced as folk dance in Sweden. So it's like borrowed, everything in classical music is borrowed.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Karina Wilson**

You don't realize it or you're not taught it, but it's so like getting to the roots of a place or of the music. It grew so much better when you play these minuets or pasodobles in the original style. I wish you could hear the actual backup that goes with that pasodobles because there's like this conversation between the guitar or the bajo and the violin that is super unique.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm trying to remember if this is like a right thing that my brain is pulling up. I thought I remembered that the pasodobles tune was like a military march at one point. Maybe it originated as like a Spanish military march. I think I only learned this because at one point, I was curious, as a new contra musician, because contra dance music is often around 120 beats per minute. I just did this search of what other forms of music are at 120 beats per minute, just to try to figure out what other genres are out there that could theoretically. Now if the groove is right, and the format is right and the shape, but I thought I remembered reading that a pasodobles was also 120 beats per minute, and I was like, ooh.

**Karina Wilson**

Let's see, I've got a metronome right here, let's see.

**Julie Vallimont**

But that doesn't mean you want to contra dance to it.

**Karina Wilson**

Oh, yes, that is about right. It's not always the tempo that makes the groove or that makes it appropriate.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's not just the tempo, a polska is a perfect example of that. You can't waltz easily to a polska most of the time because the groove is so different and especially if you have like the moveable two-beat then it's really not possible. There's so many tunes that are in the...in the contra repertoire that are in the Portland Collection, where they were an Irish tune and then they became an Appalachian tune and then they ended up in the contra tradition. A lot of tunes kind of wander back and forth. I like to think of it as a cell, like it has a semi-permeable membrane. A lot of these traditions have permeable membranes on them.

**Karina Wilson**

That's a very good way of looking at it.

**Julie Vallimont**

In the Portland Collection, there are those little blurbs in the back that the format of the book doesn't allow them to write a whole essay about every tune, but they do spend a short paragraph talking about the history of the tune.

**Karina Wilson**

It gives you a little idea of where it's from and if it's a modern tune or not.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, and who composed it and why...

**Karina Wilson**

I feel like that's a really those I love those Portland books are like a great reference, especially when you're sort of removed from all of the tunes that are happening out. They're another scenes and then you get a book and you're like, Oh, cool who is this Noah VanNorstrand?

**Julie Vallimont**

That weirdo. Look at this. Yeah, a lot of people learn from the Portland collections. Yeah. And we've talked about this on, you know, earlier episodes of this podcast, but they have this dual effect of increasing the number of tunes in our repertoire and homogenizing it simultaneously, you know, which I'm sure you know, one of these days, I'd like to speak with the Portland collection, folks, they're on the list. Oh, yeah. And one day the schedule will line up. But you have, like, you know, that's gonna happen, but it's just such a valuable resource. It's totally worth it. Yeah. And, you know, they, it seems like they made the choice. Again, I'll let them speak for themselves when the time comes. But since we're talking about it, it seems like they made the choice to just put in the version of the tune that was submitted to them, recognizing that there is no definitive version of a tune, right. So the...some of the versions in there aren't the way the original composer quote unquote, "wrote" them. But that's literally called the folk process. Yeah, you know, and it may be some tunes, the way they originally written doesn't get played much, you know, right. And, or, if it does, it doesn't get played much in the contra world. And so you can have 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 different versions of a tune all floating around, and they get different enough from each other. Sometimes after a while you meet them. And you're like, are these two the same species, are like, the same tune? And then you can kind of hold them up and compare them to each other and be like, I think these were the same tune once. Yeah. Yeah, that's really cool. It's really cool.

**Karina Wilson**

It's sometimes funny, because sometimes they're not the same tune. But there's these are so similar, but they seem like they originated from the same place. But like, this is a totally different name. And it comes from a totally different tradition.

**Julie Vallimont**

Where are your favorite sources now to look for new tunes and music?

**Karina Wilson**

Um, this...I've been following...well, when I was in, when I was in Europe, I went to a workshop in Belgium in Ghent called [Fiddlers on the Move](https://www.fotm.be/) that I that bring different people from all over Europe, different teachers to do workshops and, and, and so I've been following those teachers, and I guess it's just sort of random where I'm getting my tunes and music from anymore. I love the, the online thing that Audrey Knuth was doing...

**Julie Vallimont**

[Tunes 'n Stuff](http://www.audreyknuth.com/tunes-n-stuff).

**Karina Wilson**

I never actually like attended one of her Zoom things but she puts up such great videos like introducing the tunes that she was gonna learn that I've been following her stuff forever it never worked out but I could I could attend one but yeah tunes and stuff or or up until this pandemic year it was always is like Lark camp jam sessions are playing with the the tunes that like George Paul likes, he would all he introduced me to a ton of new tunes when I was working with him or playing. Yeah, it's mostly and he writes a lot of tunes. He writes a lot of tunes. But mostly it's it's preparing to play with different people is where I ended up learning the most tunes. And like, what is sort of hot and what is sort of shelved. Kind of like, so I've gotten a lot of tunes from [Ryan McKasson](http://www.ryanmckasson.com/), I play a lot of stuff from him. I play stuff that I've gotten from [Peter Siegel](https://petersiegel.com/). I've a lot of things I get from Larry, of course, that are different than different camps. I still, I mean, I still go to, go to different music camps as a as a student, even, you know, and so I try to try to learn tunes from that and I've learned a couple of really great tunes from Rosie, [Rosie Newton](https://rosienewtonmusic.com/). And yeah, it's all it's all over. I kind of feel like, like I have so such a stick in the mud when it comes to modern pop music and like radio, like just stuff you hear on the radio, that I often don't listen to radio and I pretty much just know where am I getting stuff? I I go through [Dust-to-Digital](https://dust-digital.com/). There's this great online platform or handle this...Dust-to-Digital and I go, I follow them like religiously. I've been really getting into going back into the Alan Lomax collections and looking for it through archives and, and really, it's it's like music that people have shared with me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you ever play New England tunes? Like those classic New England tunes? Is that something that comes up in the New Mexico dancing?

**Karina Wilson**

Yeah, totally. Like Rory O'More and Money Musk and Petronella .Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, people out there call chestnuts?

**Karina Wilson**

Not very many. [Wendy Graham](http://www.perkypantsdance.com/wendy_dances.html) does. She's in Colorado. And yeah, it's not, it's not so much of a thing out here. But I love those tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's, and then there's tunes that are just quintessentially New England, and some of them had dances that went with them, but we may just play them without the dance. And some of them didn't. And, you know, like, Dominion Reel or Lamplighter's Hornpipe. Or, you know, Batchelder's Reel...do you play any of those kinds of tunes?

**Karina Wilson**

Like Big John McNeil, and yeah, yeah, I love those tunes. I actually, right next to my desk, I have this collection of New England....[holds up book]

**Karina Wilson**

New England Fiddler's Repertoire. I teach them to my students. A lot of these tunes in here, well, not a lot of them, but we'll go through...because I am, I have my classical students. Oops, sorry about that, like classical students. But then I also have a couple of fiddle students who don't want to do classical music at all. And so we've been trying to work through different stuff and, and so this has been a really useful, helpful thing, because these tunes are, are written out it's in such an easy way to, to use as a backbone and then to work off of and, and get into how, how you bring a tune to life. And, and I laugh, I'm like, I love this connection and these tunes. Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah!

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, The [New England Fiddler's Repertoire](https://www.fiddlecasebooks.com/store/p1/New_England_Fiddler%27s_Repertoire.html) put together by [Randy Miller](https://www.fiddlecasebooks.com/), who is somebody else who we would love to have on the podcast someday, if the scheduling and timing works out. But it's such a great reference. Because if you're not based in New England, and even if you are, I mean, a lot of these tunes, they don't show up anymore. You're not going to encounter them like, out in the wild that like a session, right? Or a jam or anything. Yeah. Except these magical jams at [Maine Fiddle Camp](https://www.mainefiddlecamp.org/) where occasionally there'll just be this rousing New England jam. The same energy as you'd find in Irish or Scottish or old time jam. And I was like, Yes, this is the best!

**Karina Wilson**

Yeah!

**Julie Vallimont**

These tunes are also awesome to jam on.

**Karina Wilson**

They're super awesome to jam on.

**Julie Vallimont**

They're so awesome to jam on. And like the couple times I was at Ashokan getting to accompany David Kaynor, his New England tunes class. So fun. They're the best tunes to jam on and I feel like they're underrated. I just feel like because New England music as like, a folk tradition doesn't have that same notoriety as some of these other traditions or perhaps age or depth or, you know, I'm not a historian of this stuff. But I feel like we take it for granted sometimes.

**Karina Wilson**

Totally. Yeah. And they're kind of looked down on...

**Julie Vallimont**

Or we kind of look down on it. Yeah...

**Karina Wilson**

Yeah, like, oh, that dorky thing. Who wants to play that old chestnut?

**Julie Vallimont**

[jokingly] "I want to play balfolk."

**Karina Wilson**

Right? Because but I feel like there's, there's like this magic to them where it is this interesting style that has like this very "uppy" backbeat to it. Like it's, just it, it brings to mind the picture of New England. It's, it's like exactly perfect in that. Like, like, what it feels like in the when it goes from summer to fall and the harvest season and like, what typically life would be like, back when, when these tunes were really popular and like really played at the kind of at the height of the tune's, life maybe even though it's still going. It's like, like, it always just brings to mind sort of like horse drawn sleighs in the snow where we wouldn't have that here because it's much different. It's a very different climate and so we have different needs, like the music here is a little bit spicier. And you can really like, what's another new, New Mexican tune comparative to a New England tune...like, Big John McNeil is one of the...yeah... [plays Big John McNeil] is a New England tune, but then a New Mexican tune, like, let's see, what's a good example. Um, I just played for this, this fiddler who's on his in his last days of life, he's he's 91. And he's at hospice in his home. And in the end, my band went and we played for him because we he was one of the keepers of the New Mexican tradition. He was one of the last of the old players. His name is Mariano Romero, and we play this this polka that he that he composed, it's like [plays polka] it just sounds, it like feels and sounds more like, oh, it's back from the days where you had to ride...like the only dancing speaking like how dancing worked into the daily life. It was a community of farmers out here pretty much and they would have their plots and there's, there's the Spanish connection, going historically, like these old Spanish settlements. But there's also this indigenous American connection and so if you hear all this stuff, but then like what with the feel like it just you can kind of hear the sound of the landscape in these tunes and like what was going on? It's like a simpler, kind of flatter, kind of dustier. kind of like more...sandy...faster... Like you can imagine this fiddler who mostly works in the field, but then rides a horse, like from village to village to play for these dances. And they're all sort of like partner dances more than contra dance, where it's like a whole, where it's led. There are some of those that are more like square dances, but it's more like la varsovienne or things where it's or polka is where it's really like two people who are just dancing and there's not a lot of teaching involved. It's, it's like, and it's a just has a different background. And I feel like I feel like you can hear all of that in, in these different tunes in the different styles that they're playing and the different ornamentation and the different modalities and, and harmonies and backups and, like, so, yeah, it's...it's interesting.

**Julie Vallimont**

I guess as a final thought. How do you see contra music changing? Or the contra scene changing? Like, since you grew up in it, and, you know, some of it is through your own changes and your own tastes changing as you learn new things? But what do you think about the future of contra dance music and where it's headed?

**Karina Wilson**

I think I'm not sure. I feel like, it's just gonna keep hopefully, in the way that I would like, for it to go is to keep connected to the tradition, but also still in the way that it has been incorporating other genres and musical styles. I feel like, like, I hope that keeps going and and it doesn't lose sight of where it has come from, as it's headed towards going like...you are a techno contra composer. Like, yeah, but um, and I feel like that is a really interesting innovation. And it, it helps but as it's, I think it's going to be interesting to see where it goes. And I really hope that it still stays connected to the old ways, even with the social changes that are happening in terms of like, new language and new...and the barriers of perception that are coming down just in our society, and it's, I hope that it doesn't negatively affect the contra dance world with people who are exhausted with, like, just trying to find new terminology that there is more gender inclusive or like, less gendered, and more free. And also, like, more politically correct. And...but also, like, I feel like there's about to be a really big shift in the how contra dance is done because of people's now spatial awareness and, and like how we used to not think about it at all and you'd grab somebody's hand and you'd be like sweating all over each other and breathing all over each other and, and, like, really sometimes getting a little uncomfortably too close. And, and everything's and I feel like that is all about to as, as contra dance starts happening again, I feel like that's about to become an issue. And, and people are gonna start come up against people's comfort levels. And everybody has a different threshold now where...because we are more conscientious of the microbials that we're sharing and shared space. And and so I think it's going to go through a really big transition, but I hope it doesn't lose connection with where it's coming from.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, yeah, I'm really curious, like post-COVID how that will affect dance culture in that way. Because we've all been having conversations about consent and our boundaries in whole different ways in the last year and a half. I won't say we all have, that's not at all true. But some of us have been thinking about this a lot more. There are other people who have gone about life as usual. And then there are people who are somewhere in the middle. Yeah. But I think we'll have to talk about this a little bit more. And how can we continue to make sure that our dances are a place that feels safe and welcoming? Yeah, people from all walks of life and yeah, background. Yeah.

**Karina Wilson**

Yeah it's...I hope we figure it out. You know, I hope like...for a little while, when COVID was starting up, and it seemed like, contra dance was like, one of the giantest no no's, it's like, man, I hope this isn't the death of this tradition. You know? And the nail in the coffin but I don't think it is. I think people are so like, they it's it's such a necessary part of of positive of positive mental function really, that it's not going to...it's not going to be put down by by a mere virus.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right. No virus is gonna stop us. There's a lot of people who miss it and don't feel like themselves without it. Yeah, cut off from their communities and just moving their bodies to good music, I mean, all this like, you know, theorizing aside, just moving your body to good music in a roomful of happy people is a great thing.

**Karina Wilson**

It's a great thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

And, you know, dances have already started up I saw that was a dance in River Falls... [dog barks] This is the first dog on the podcast. This is great. We've had a cat. The cat was silent. But we did have like, the presence of a cat. But I think this is our first dog. Nice work. Like they just had a dance of River Falls, with like a caller and a band.

**Karina Wilson**

Oh my god wow.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like, there's camps running this summer at Pinewoods and beyond. Yeah. And I'm like, hoa, you know, a lot of dances are talking about when they can restart for the fall.

**Karina Wilson**

I've been starting on the local scene, too.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember the beginning of the podcast, I would say these enthusiastically naive things that I knew were naive, but we just have to hold on to hope. Right? And like, it's just like riding a bike. We'll get right back to it. And it'll be like, no time has elapsed. Which is like, true and not true right? Like, I think we will it'll, it'll be surprisingly normal and wonderful to get back to it. But then also, we've all changed a little bit. You know, we're not the same as we used to be. Our culture isn't the same as it used to be. But it's what do we make out of that? And let's focus on the joy. Try not to fall into squabbling? That's not a fair word. Let's focus on the joy for now.

**Karina Wilson**

Yeah. The joy and less of the petty issues. I don't know, that's also not fair...

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah I can't find good words, because the issues are important.

**Karina Wilson**

They're not petty, yeah...

**Julie Vallimont**

But I feel like sometimes the conversation...it goes in circles, like the conversation going in circles is what maybe we're all ready to move on from. Yeah, maybe let's, let's focus on the joy and trying to look at some of these things from new and different perspectives.

**Karina Wilson**

Yeah. Yes. That's a beautiful, beautiful sentiment moving forward.

**Julie Vallimont**

It has been so wonderful to talk with you. Is there anything else you want to add?

**Karina Wilson**

I don't think so. No, that's it's been really been really great to talk to you too Julie and feel like connected into the contra dance world. I feel like you're, you're like, single handedly kind of holding it together right now in this, in this project.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh no, I'm just talking about it a lot. There are other people who are getting ready...like I saw [David Cantieni](http://www.swallowtail.com/David.html) posted some pictures of their varnishing the floor of the [Guiding Star Grange](https://www.guidingstargrange.org/) in Greenfield, getting it ready to dance on. Those are the people who are holding the community together. I'm happy to talk about it and keep us...you had a great phrase before, what did you talk about? I'm going to get this wrong, but maybe you can remind me...it was your intentional garden? Your awareness garden?

**Karina Wilson**

My intention garden. I feel like wherever you're putting your intention, that's the garden that's going to grow. When I was going back and forth on the road, and then back to my local scene, I really felt like one would have gone to seed and you have to do all this work to get it back into like functionality, where it's working for you and you're in the flow and everything's working right. Then you kind of have to go back to the other pasture and get that one seasonally happening again, too. Yeah, your intention garden, or attention.

**Julie Vallimont**

This attention garden for contra dance has been fallow for a while for a lot of people. But that doesn't mean it's not there and now people are starting to return their attention to it and that's a really cool thing. It'll be interesting to watch over the next few months how everything goes. Well, thank you so much for your time, Karina. It's been wonderful to talk with you today.

**Karina Wilson**

Hopefully I'll see you soon at one of these gatherings.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sure hope so, take care.

**Karina Wilson**

You too, 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.***