**Contra Pulse Episode 30 – Jeff Spero**

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This episode I sit down with pianist, caller, dance choreographer, and west coaster Jeff Spero. Jeff has been playing piano and singing since he was five years old. At a young age he discovered an affinity for popular music and developed his style emulating musicians like James Taylor, Elton John, and Bruce Hornsby. In his 30s, he brought his rhythmic style to American and Celtic folk and dance music and now travels around the country playing dances, concerts and festivals with bands such as Syncopaths and Rhythm Raptors.

Jeff has become one of the most well known dance pianists on the west coast. Known for his energetic style and creative arrangements, Jeff has brought his talents to dances and festivals throughout the nation. His accompaniments bring a fresh perspective to traditional forms.

**Julie Vallimont**

In addition to his musical talents, Jeff is also in demand as a contradance caller and has called dances and dance camps from Washington DC to San Diego. His dances have been called throughout the country. He is co-editor of “(southern) California Twirls,” a book that chronicles the history of contradancing in southern California, and is currently working on his second book featuring contradances written throughout the state.

In his day job, Jeff is a video editor. He has been at the editorial helm for award winning documentaries, major network reality shows, national sports shows, concerts, commercials and more.

In our conversation, Jeff and I discuss his early influences, some of the nuances of the west coast contra dance scene, the evolution of his signature style, and how he approaches playing music for dancers. He did the interview over Zoom sitting at his home piano in Culver City, California and the conversation is embellished with tunes and musical interludes. Hope you enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hello, [Jeff Spero](http://www.jeffreyspero.com/) and welcome to Contra Pulse.

**Jeff Spero**

Thank you, Julie Vallimont, good to be here.

**Julie Vallimont**

So nice to see you. I don't normally walk up and say "Well, hello, Jeff Spero" to you.

**Jeff Spero**

This is quite true.

**Julie Vallimont**

But honestly, it's been a while since I've walked up and said anything to you and it's just really nice to see your face over Zoom.

**Jeff Spero**

It's been a long time since I said hello to most anyone in person. So yes. It's also wonderful to see you too.

**Julie Vallimont**

Where are you right now?

**Jeff Spero**

I am in Culver City, California, home of NPR West. Like this is the one thing we're known for here in Culver City is NPR West.

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know about NPR West.

**Jeff Spero**

When I'm out with [The Syncopaths](https://www.syncopaths.com/) we tend to have this game to see who at a contra dance weekend will be the first person to say NPR because NPR is always mentioned it seems like at a contra dance weekend.

**Julie Vallimont**

I guess there's a lot of crossover between contra dances and NPR listeners

**Jeff Spero**

That and Priuses, that is the stereotypical contra dancer, a Prius owning NPR listening person.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I'm pretty sure if you give money to NPR, they give you a tote bag and a Prius. So Culver City, California, and you do editing during the day, video editing?

**Jeff Spero**

I do.

**Julie Vallimont**

What kind of things do you edit?

**Jeff Spero**

Oh, right now it's just a job, it's stuff that people don't really want to watch, commercials and things like that. I thought about getting into more meaningful editing and I did for a little while but when you're editing the good stuff, the producers kind of own you. If they want you to stay over and work on a weekend, they don't care if you have a gig somewhere else. They want you to stay over and work. So I took this because I can pretty much set my own hours.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's great. Well, let's dive in. I mean, I've known you for enough years that I can count, but not so many that we go way back, it's like somewhere in the middle.

**Jeff Spero**

Right, exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

But you know, we fellow piano players tend to find each other and bond and I've had a lot of fun talking piano with you over the years. And I'm excited to do that tonight. It is 9pm my time because Jeff is three hours ahead of me. So if I start to get a little fuzzy in the next couple hours, we'll just blame it on time difference. But I would just love to hear how you started playing music. And you know, today you're a caller as well as a musician and I would just love to hear how your life went down that path.

**Jeff Spero**

Well, I started playing piano when I was five. My parents would take me to musicals that would happen in the park. I grew up in Kentucky, in Louisville. Yes, I'm a Louisvillian. So one of the only words that I say like a Louisvillian, I will say Louisville. But outside of that my accent seems to have never happened. But yeah, my parents would take me to see musicals. I would come home and I would just plunk out the melodies on the piano. My parents were pretty amazed because although they both loved music, they are both pretty much tone deaf. That wasn't something that they could have considered doing themselves. So when I was able to come home and [piano playing] they were, they were pretty shocked. I just continued to play by ear, I have a brother who's four years older than I am, who is also very musically talented. And in a way, it was kind of a competition. He was playing piano, so I wanted to play piano. Eventually, he switched over to guitar, acoustic guitar, and we played together. But it was a lot of...I wanted to be like my brother. So he was taking piano lessons. I started taking lessons at 6. My teacher didn't really know that when she was teaching me I was cheating. When I was first playing, she would put music down right in front of me and she would play it. So I think the first thing I ever learned how to play by music was[piano playing] so basically, I can remember my first, my first melody, but she played it for me before she put the music down. So it was in my head and I was playing it by ear and we went through seven years of piano lessons. Every time she would play what it was, before I played it, whether it was something that was somewhat difficult Maple Leaf Rag or some other Joplin rag or something else, I would still always hear it before I started playing it, so once I had it in my ears, the music made sense, but I was always playing by ear.

**Julie Vallimont**

How far did you end up going with written music?

**Jeff Spero**

Well, after about six or seven years, she told me that she had taught me about as much as she could teach me and so she suggested that I go down to the Louisville Conservatory of Music and I thought that was a good idea as well. I told them down there that I wanted to develop my ear training and learn theory and that kind of stuff. I don't know if I said theory, I might not have known exactly what theory was at 13 but I was playing with theory by then already. My first my first lesson down there, they said, okay, well, let's see where you are, how many years have you been playing, and I said, I've been playing for seven years. So they put music down in front of me that, someone who had been playing for seven years by music should be able to sight read and play and I told him that I could not play that. And so they kept going down sixth year music fifth year, fourth year, finally, like about second or third year music, I could play it. The teacher said, okay, we'll start here and I said, no, we won't, this isn't what I want to do. And they didn't really know what to do with me so I stopped my music lessons at that point, I just from that point on was pretty much self taught.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's like a lot of different ways that our musical brains work, and some people work really well from written music. Some people work really well from hearing things by ear, some people have perfect pitch. Some people have amazing memories for music, or once they learned something they never forget it. Some people can think about theory. That's something that I've always wished I could do is I understand the theory on paper, but I can't apply it in real time. While I'm playing. I'm talking like complex things like jazz theory, if you're playing jazz changes, and it's really complicated I know people can just hold all that in their head and look at it in three dimensions, like you'd have a math problem in your head and things like that. The only way I can do those things is if I memorize them first by sound, I have to be able to audiate them and then if I can audiate them, I can play them. And so we all have to like find the worlds where our skills are the most useful, right? We gravitate towards those things. I did not have a career ahead of me as a jazz musician. I'm not a theoretical analytical musician like that. It seems like for you, who reading sheet music isn't really your game, playing contra dance seems like a great thing for you to be doing.

**Jeff Spero**

I don't think I would make a good jazz musician either. Mostly because I didn't listen to jazz growing up. I love it now. I didn't listen to it growing up and so I don't have the muscle memory for jazz. Some people think that I have some elements of jazz in my playing, and maybe there's a little bit but mostly I'm just playing what I grew up listening to and that was the popular music of the day.

**Julie Vallimont**

If you grew up with showtunes, there's elements of jazz in showtunes and in a lot of popular music and so those things tend to percolate. You know, show tunes can have really interesting harmonic progressions, and all sorts of cool stuff happening.

**Jeff Spero**

Yeah, it's interesting, because I stopped playing show tunes pretty early on. It was where I got my start, I guess, just playing the melody but when it came to playing harmonies, I was just playing things that I heard on the radio. I would hear Elton John and I tried to play Elton John, and I'd hear James Taylor and Jackson Browne and Joni Mitchell and that's what I, that's what I was trying to play. I was trying to emulate it to the absolute best that I could. The music theory that I learned, I picked up from what I was hearing on the radio. Unfortunately, I wish I had listened to more jazz, I think I'd be a much better musician if I had but it was mostly the folk rock of the era.

**Julie Vallimont**

Would you play along with it or just listen to it? How did you internalize it?

**Jeff Spero**

That's going back a few decades. I don't think I had a radio near the piano. I think I would listen to the music, and then sit down at the piano and play it and my brother would, would pick up the guitar, and he would play with me.We would play all sorts of stuff together. Whether it was [plays intro to "Fire and Rain" by James Taylor on piano] I can't even play it anymore. Let's see, something like James Taylor or something like that, or [plays intro to "Your Song" by Elton John] Elton John. I would hear it and then I would sit down at the piano and I'd try to play it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I used to do that, too. It's fun, it's really fun. Sometimes you don't get the chords right and 20 years later, I was like, I have never played this song the right way. I'm finally disciplined enough that I'm going to learn the chords the right way. But as a kid, you know, it's easy just to like gloss over all those little moments. Did you ever play with fake books, I used to have fake books, I was really in the classic rock and 70s rock growing up. I had like the Queen fake book and Led Zeppelin and some of this stuff doesn't really belong on the piano. But that did not stop me. I had a Styx book, questionably.

**Jeff Spero**

Well, Stairway to Heaven actually works on the piano, I suppose.

**Julie Vallimont**

It does quite well. They would just have chord symbols and some written out riffs and things like that and then you just kind of figure out how it goes from there.

**Jeff Spero**

It's funny because I'm the exact same way now, I have not changed one bit. If I'm playing a contra dance and someone puts the [Portland Collection](https://www.theportlandcollection.com/) down in front of me and says here are the chords, I close the book. I don't want to see the chords. I want to hear it myself and play it myself and it was the same way back then. I may have had one or two fake books but hardly ever, I wanted the challenge of figuring it out myself. So I always did, I didn't get the books, I listened and I worked at it and worked at it and eventually got the sound right.

**Julie Vallimont**

So the process you must hear in your head what you think it should sound like and then when you hit a wrong note that's not right your brain tells you that's not what you are looking for. I'm just curious about that process of how you would figure out these things by ear.

**Jeff Spero**

Yeah, that was exactly it. You just completely nailed it. I would play it and if it wasn't the right notes, if it wasn't the right chord, I would work at it until I figured out well what is the right chord and I started figuring out chord progressions. The musician who really helped me the most with that was James Taylor because his music sounds like it's I, IV, V. I mean, you listen to it on the radio and it sounds like it's the simplest I, IV,V progression and then you sit down, you try to play it, and he is all over the place.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right? It's amazing.

**Jeff Spero**

How he can do that and make it sound so simple. I found that that was a wonderful challenge for me was James Taylor and I bought all, every James Taylor album that I could find, I would buy it, I would sit down, and I would try to play all of it. I think that really helps with my ear training more than anything else.

**Julie Vallimont**

There are a lot of great songwriters that have that as one of their hallmarks, right where the music sounds so simple and accessible and just natural. It doesn't even occur to you how weird the chords are until you start to play them. I feel like a lot of The Beatles is the same way, especially later, but not the weird stuff. You know what I mean? Like Paul Simon songs, and like a lot of folks like that, and James Taylor. There are some fiddle tunes that are like that. This is an interesting conversation to me, because I think it helps demystify what accompaniment is, which we can talk about later, as we get to the contra part of your life story. We didn't get very far because I went off on a tangent. I think you were eight years old in the story. Teaching piano to people, it's about demystifying accompaniment, and what it really is. And literally, sometimes all we're doing is trying out different chords into the tune and seeing what works and what doesn't and then trying again and again, thankfully, tunes are short. It's like, to me, playing a tune is like running laps around the Indy 500 race course, where it's a short little lap, and every time you go around it, you can pick up more details of what's going on and what's happening around you and you start to fill in the details and sometimes you just guess, and you guess wrong sometimes. You have to be able to hear it and learn from it.

**Jeff Spero**

That voyage of discovery is brilliant. I remember an occasion, I just started playing for contras so this would have been early '90s, I think. I was filling in for a local pianist who was sick. I was the last one to substitute and I'd only been playing contra for probably just a few months at that point. We had a guest caller who was coming to town. I was going to be playing piano for Lisa Greenleaf and I was nervous. But I was also really excited to be to be playing there. And for the life of me, I cannot remember what the tune was but we were playing a tune and just like going around the racetrack, at one spot, there's a speed bump. I could not come up with the right chord. Lisa was calling and she had this smile on her face because she knew that I was struggling with this one. She wasn't laughing at me. She just found it really interesting that I would I would try different things and at some point, I finally got it. And she smiled and we went on. About a year and a half later I happened to be in and this was out here in California in LA about a year and a half later I was in North Carolina and she was calling a dance there. During the break, I went up to her and said, look, I'm sure you have no idea who I am. And I don't think she remembered my name but she looked at me and she said oh no, you're that guy who was playing piano in Los Angeles when I was out there calling. I remember you very well because there was this one tune that you were playing and there was this one chord you were having the biggest problem finding. And she said and all of a sudden I looked over and I could almost literally see the light bulb go off over your head when you found the chord. She said this is something I will never forget.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's a great story.

**Jeff Spero**

So I guess that leads back into how did I start playing for for contra. I was about 30 years old, I guess. Maybe a little bit older. I'd just been contra dancing for maybe a year. Maybe two and there was a really good pianist out here, Marty Morrissey, who was playing for a lot of the dances and he decided that either he wanted to concentrate on Irish or he was just going tired of playing so many contra dances, but all of a sudden we had a lack of piano in LA. My girlfriend at the time, the woman who I eventually married, was friends with [Steve and Leda Shapiro](https://folkworks.org/miscellaneous/brd-steve-shapiro/). They were really huge mainstays in the contra dance community here. She suggested to them that I could play. And so I went over to the Shapiros' house one night and sat down and started to play and I was probably pretty dreadful. But I could play I, IV or V, that wasn't an issue. And even then I did not want the chords in front of me. I wanted to hear the tune and play it as I went along and that was the start. I took master classes from any visiting contra dance pianist who was coming through. I remember having a class with [Daniel Steinberg](https://hillbilliesfrommars.com/steinberg.html) and [Kate Barnes](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-9-kate-barnes/) and one of the most influential was this really young teenager, Thomas Bartlett [aka [Doveman](https://www.facebook.com/Dovemanmusic)].

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, yeah.

**Jeff Spero**

[Popcorn Behavior or Assembly](https://www.last.fm/music/Popcorn+Behavior/+wiki#:~:text=Popcorn%20Behavior%20(now%20known%20as,field%20of%20Irish%2Dstyle%20players.) was coming through.

**Julie Vallimont**

I like Popcorn Assembly. That's a great summary of their band names.

**Jeff Spero**

That's a nice combination there. They were playing a weekend festival out here in LA and Thomas gave a masterclass. Here I was, twice his age but it didn't matter. He was, it was just brilliant. It was nice to be able to take pieces from each of these pianists that I admired and respected and then bring in my own style from what I grew up with and try to combine all of them into, into a style for contra. I will say that it took a while for the people here to catch on to my style. I think it probably also took a while for me to become danceable. I remember a gig in Santa Barbara, where I was playing and one woman who was dancing broke out of the line. She didn't wait till she was at the top or the bottom of the set, she broke out of the line, ran up to the foot of the stage, pounded her fist on the stage looked up at me and just yelled, play a rhythm!

**Julie Vallimont**

We've all been there, it's just you learn on the job and we all learn as we go.

**Jeff Spero**

Absolutely. I think it was a learning experience for both the dancers and for me. I think I had to learn to become a better dance musician. I think that the dancers here, who are mostly used to everyone in Southern California was mostly just playing oompah on the piano. And so it took them a while to get used to my style as well. I think there was a meeting of the minds at some point where I changed, they changed, and it started to work.

**Julie Vallimont**

Could you show us a little bit of the difference between like basic oompah or boom, chuck and then play a few bars of like your typical kind of syncopated style?

**Jeff Spero**

Sure. What people were doing when I first arrived was more like [simple boom chuck style piano playing] they may do some, some lead in like that, or just something very simple like that it was the typical piano style. When I first started playing, I quickly developed what I call a modified boom chuck, which is [syncopated boom chuck piano playing] so it has a little bit of that syncopation in it, which just gave me a little bit of something different to do than just [simple piano playing] which I'd just fall asleep playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, but it's still very much based in boom chuck.

**Jeff Spero**

It is, which is why I call it a modified boom chuck. That's what I did for quite a while until I started exploring a whole bunch of just different rhythmic kind of things and realizing that the piano, while a rhythmic instrument and a melodic instrument isn't responsible for the rhythm. I think as an accompanist we're responsible for not messing up the rhythm. But there is a ton of rhythm in the bow. I feel as an accompanist, I'm not needed, that a dance can go on just fine with just a fiddler, and nothing else. Because there is so much rhythm in the bow. My job is to not mess it up if I'm playing with someone, and if I can enhance in some ways, that's great. I'm happy to enhance. But I don't feel like I'm needed and that is a wonderful feeling. Because it frees you up to do all sorts of things when you feel like you're not needed to be the rhythm.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right, so that's liberating. And then it's good to have the skills of being able to play oompah. So that if you are in a place where you do have to be the rhythm, like if you're playing for an open band, or a giant orchestra, or beginner musicians, or people who haven't all played together and maybe need something to anchor around, then you can kind of dig into that if you need to but you don't have to. It seems like fiddlers also vary in what they want from their piano players, at least the ones I've played with, there's some who play with so much rhythm that you don't have to be the rhythm. And then there's some that generally like a little more support, or they want a little more support, even if they don't need it, because then that gives them the freedom to play around. What has your experience been like around that?

**Jeff Spero**

I feel fortunate that I play with people who want to play with me. I think that's the trick to forming a good band or having a good band is finding people who musically sync the way you do. I don't want to play with people who want me to change my style. It's not that I play the same way with everyone, I don't. Maybe five years, six years ago, maybe I started playing with [Rodney Miller](https://www.rodneymiller.net/). That was a different experience for me without a doubt and I play differently if I'm playing as a duo, or as a trio or as a quartet, or quintet. If there's a drum kit behind me, I'm not gonna play the same way as I would play if it's fiddle, mandolin and piano. It's important to leave room for everyone. So it's not that I play the same way with everyone but it's still important for me to play with people who like the style in which I play.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you could be you.

**Jeff Spero**

Exactly, because I can't really be anyone else. I had an instance, I think it's okay to say this...I was asked to play for an English country dance ball. There were two other musicians and they were told choose an accompanist who you would like to play with and they chose me. When they presented their choice of me to the organizers, the organizers said well, that's good just ask him to not play like he's in the Syncopaths. So in other words, don't play the way that I play. I went back to the two musicians and I said, I am me, I play the way I play and I really think you should probably find a different pianist. I know that they wanted to play with me. But if the organizers didn't, I'm not going to change because I really can't. My style is my style. I would love to be [Jacqueline Schwab](http://www.jacquelineschwab.com/index.html), she's brilliant. But that's not who I am, I'm me. So I suggested to the other musicians that they find a different pianist and they said that they told the organizers that they promised that anything that we would play would be appropriate. So I did end up playing the gig. I think the dancers really enjoyed it. I'm not so sure about the organizers.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's the great thing about our tradition is that there are a few different ways of doing it. There are infinite different ways of doing it. It's wonderful that we can have Jacqueline Schwabs and Kate Barneses, and Jeff Speros, and all these different flavors and tastes. Jacqueline would also agree that she doesn't want everyone to sound like her. We love having this diversity. It's funny the way they phrase that to you, because as a teacher, you usually want to ask for a positive instead of a negative, to say, like, we can hire you, but don't play how you sound is not a very clear instruction, right?

**Jeff Spero**

Now, of course, I'm getting this second hand through the other musicians

**Julie Vallimont**

It makes me wonder, I'm not trying to blame the person but I just wonder what they wanted. It would have been more interesting to me if they could articulate what they actually do want.

**Jeff Spero**

I know what they wanted. I know exactly what they wanted.

**Julie Vallimont**

What did they want?

**Jeff Spero**

They wanted Jacqueline Schwab. That's what they wanted.

**Julie Vallimont**

So they wanted a style that's kind of more, I don't know, how do we put words around these things? Jacqueline's style is beautiful and expressive and kind of more classically based maybe but also very expressionistic and rhythmic in a different way than you are rhythmic and all these things, floral at times, feel like we're talking about wine now.

**Jeff Spero**

That's a good way of putting it, absolutely. I think you just did a great description of Jacqueline's style. And admittedly, I think Jacqueline style has influenced just so many wonderful English country dance musicians. It's a wonderful style, and I love her style. [Bare Necessities](https://www.facebook.com/Bare-Necessities-183265758390140/) is incredible. It's not what I play. One of my first favorite contra dance bands was [Nightingale](https://www.nightingalevt.org/). I mean, who didn't like Nightingale? Everyone loved Nightingale. Anytime that either [Keith [Murphy]](https://blackislemusic.com/bios-press-kit/keith-murphy) or [Jeremiah [McLane]](https://www.jeremiahmclane.com/) would sit down at the piano, I was completely enthralled. They both played it so beautifully, so perfectly and it was my favorite music to listen to but it wasn't the way I played. So there's a difference, just like jazz, I love listening to jazz. I don't play it, but I love listening to it. So yeah, everyone has their own style.

**Julie Vallimont**

So what kind of tunes do you feel fit your style best? Where are you happiest?

**Jeff Spero**

Oh, my. Okay, well, this is where I get into the confessional. As I stated, my background was in popular music. I have no background in traditional Irish, Cape Breton, Celtic. None of that. If someone asked me to play, traditional Scottish, I wouldn't know how to do it. Same thing with Cape Breton. I don't know how to play traditionally. I wasn't the person who studied it. I was kind of thrown into contra and contra is a melding of a whole bunch of different styles. [Ryan McKasson](http://www.ryanmckasson.com/) has said on multiple occasions, it's its own genre. It's not like you're playing these other styles. You're playing a contra genre and I believe that to be true. So when someone asks what style fits me the best I don't know because I don't really have a style that I grew up in. Contra style is what fits me the best. I mean, it's a cop out, sorry but it's the best I can do. When I started playing contra, it just felt like home to me.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, it could be a question of not so much the tunes themselves and the styles that they come from, but who is playing the tune and how they're playing it and how you're interacting as a band.

**Jeff Spero**

Oh, absolutely. It also had a lot to do with the, contra dance bands that I was listening to at the time, whether it was Nightingale or [Hillbillies from Mars](https://hillbilliesfrommars.com/), the things that Daniel [Steinberg] did on piano there were brilliant. I always thought of Daniel as a musical genius, he can draw from so many different styles. He melds them together when he plays and it was that kind of thing that really influenced me. I don't have as much to draw from as some of the other musicians, because they do have backgrounds in many different styles. I fake it a lot, I think that's what I do the best is I fake.

**Julie Vallimont**

I've been curious to rewind a little bit, because I was just so curious when you were talking about the piano players that you learned from and who were inspiring to you. You mentioned Thomas Bartlett, do you remember which things you especially took away from each of those styles? Do you remember anything that Thomas talked about in his workshop?

**Jeff Spero**

Oh, absolutely.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because I would give anything to have been a fly on that wall however many years ago.

**Jeff Spero**

It's hard to say, but it's very possible that my style is most influenced by him over the other pianists, maybe, I don't know. It was nice, because I feel like in learning from Kate [Barnes], I feel the tradition just pouring down from [Bob McQuillen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_McQuillen) through Kate to me. I feel that there's that lineage in that, and I think most people of my generation or younger, kind of feel that as well, it's obvious that Kate learned a lot from Bob and Kate has influenced, I think pretty much all of the contra dance pianists following him.

**Julie Vallimont**

She was a big influence on me too. I had "[Interview with a Vamper](https://www.sharmusic.com/Sheet-Music/Guitar-More/Method-Book/Barnes-Peter---Interview-with-a-Vamper-Piano-Accompaniment-Techniques-for-Traditional-Dance-Music---Piano---Canis-Publishing.axd)" and it was dog eared and I practiced all the exercises. I went to her workshops at NEFFA and I sat by the stage and watched her play,

**Jeff Spero**

Absolutely. As I said, I think every every contra dance musician, following Kate was influenced by Kate, every pianist. What Thomas taught me was what he called, and I think I'm remembering his his terminology correct, note clusters. So if he was playing a D chord, he wouldn't play the triad. He would add another note in there, like maybe an E and it would fatten it up and he wouldn't just do it as a suspension. Like for me that that's one of my chords right there. It's a four over five. But it's a G chord over an A, but in the right hand, I'm playing G, A, B, and D. So I'm playing three notes in a row there and it fattens it up a lot. That was one of the things that I certainly got from Thomas, were these these note cluster ideas. It completely changed the way I played from that point on.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's interesting. [Mary Cay Brass](https://marycaybrass.com/) did something similar, but not exactly the same and I learned from her. So I also play with a lot of note clusters. But then again, you know, it's hard to trace where these things come from. Sometimes we also go in similar directions because we have similar aesthetics and it's enough that we grew up listening to the same Elton John songs and everything else as well, you know. But having permission to add these extra notes into chords was really liberating for me.

**Jeff Spero**

Absolutely. Hearing Thomas talk about it was what was ear opening I guess.

**Julie Vallimont**

What was his rationale for that?

**Jeff Spero**

This was many years ago. It's very possible his rationale was, it sounds good.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, that's all you need, you know?

**Jeff Spero**

It could have also been it just fills up the sound and I think he liked a fatter sound on the piano and so did I. I heard it and I was like, oh yeah, yeah, I like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then what were some of the things that Daniel was doing that were especially interesting to you?

**Jeff Spero**

Oh, my Daniel could quote, he quoted a Beatles song in one of the things that the Hillbillies recorded, it was that his influences were so varied. He played fearlessly, I felt. He wasn't afraid of incorporating anything from his toolbox and his toolbox was huge. I think that's one of the things that I picked up from him. My toolbox isn't nearly as big but I think the fearlessness, I picked that up from him and I also picked that up from a woman who I heard playing, and I have absolutely no idea who this woman is. She played one of the first contra dances that I attended out here in LA, and she was also a substitute. The regular pianist couldn't be there that night. And there was this woman who is sitting at the piano and from the first beats, she was having the time of her life. You could just feel the joy emanating from her. It did not matter one iota that she missed more notes, and she hit correctly. She was playing so many horribly, notes that were just, you would never intentionally ever consider trying to play some of these notes [piano playing] it could be something like that. But she was playing with such amazing energy and drive. I think that was also one of my most huge influences in playing is that it doesn't really matter that much what notes you play? It's how you play it and that was freeing. That was very freeing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like what Kate says it's better to play the wrong note at the right time than the right note at the wrong time.

**Jeff Spero**

Absolutely. I've never heard her say that but definitely, definitely true.

**Julie Vallimont**

So what kind of things are in your toolbox these days? How would you describe your style? I know it's hard to put these things into words. You could show us a couple things.

**Jeff Spero**

Well, I think I can safely say that the music that I grew up with is certainly in my style. I had an occasion, the first time that I played with Rodney [Miller] was at [LEAF](https://theleaf.org/). We had never played before but I put together, the band with Rodney and [TJ Crow](http://www.tjcrow.com/?m1=Music) and [Loren Oppenheim](https://www.ihanuman.com/features/yoga-sound-classical-indian-tabla-player-loren-oppenheimer)...Oppenheimer, a tabla player. I had never played with TJ, I knew TJ but never played with him. Rodney and I had only ever met once before, very briefly, he would not have remembered me, he and I had never played and I think Loren and I maybe had met once before. So we got together at LEAF to play the festival and so we were rehearsing before our gig on Friday nights and when you ask what kind of style what's in my toolkit, Rodney wanted to play Trip to Dingle. He had asked whether I'd ever played that tune before I had not played it, but I'd heard it many times. He looks at me, and he says, can you play this as if it were a James Taylor tune. I laughed, and he didn't know why I was laughing but I was laughing because the fiddler who I played the most with Ryan McKasson tells me that everything I play sounds like a James Taylor tune. I was like, can I? Can I? Yes, please let me. let me! So that's definitely in my toolbox. How do I, how would I express that? Well, if I was to play Dingle, this is the thing, I'm an accompanist, I don't play melodies so I can play an accompaniment here and it won't really sound like much unless there's a melody player.

**Julie Vallimont**

We could sing the melody really quick, so people get a sense.

**Jeff Spero**

Yeah, we could maybe even sing it while while playing it. Let's see, I'll give potatoes [sings Trip to Dingle with piano in a James Taylor style underneath]. Ah, that wasn't good. So I might [plays piano] that kind of [plays piano] something like that. That's out of a James Taylor playbook. I mean, there's no doubt that I'm playing 70's folk rock. That is probably the the largest tool in my in my toolbox. I've scaled it down depending on who I play with it. Playing with the Syncopaths has really changed my style a lot, especially playing with [Ashley [Hoyer]](http://www.ashbroder.com/). I have toned down and played much more sparsely than in the past. I'm listening a whole lot more than I ever have because in that band, there's so much going on and it's important. I've got this huge 88 key thing that makes a lot of noise and when you're in a quartet like that, it's important to make sure that everyone has their own space.

**Julie Vallimont**

And just for context, in the Syncopaths, correct me if I'm missing something, we have Ryan McKasson on fiddle, we have Ashley on mandolin, which like you say can get easily stomped on. We have [Christa [Burch]](http://www.christaburch.com/) on vocals or bodhrán. And probably some other things.

**Jeff Spero**

Just that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Just those things and then you.

**Jeff Spero**

Right, who plays piano and a little bass, very little bass, it's a bass ukulele. So it's very tiny. And I don't play that very often because the band makes fun of me when I pick it up.

**Julie Vallimont**

Those things are fun, though, they have the fattest strings. They're like spaghetti noodles.

**Jeff Spero**

Oh, they're awesome. I love them. And they sound wonderful, they really do. So when I'm playing with them, I might just [plays soft chord arpeggios] and just depending on the tune, I'm not gonna play something like that for a rocking out tune and maybe even not even play full chords, open chords, something like that, to just give more space for the other musicians. When I'm playing with Rodney, I tend to fill things out a little bit more because Rodney is a powerhouse himself. And when I play with Rodney, either it says a duo, we call ourselves Double Trouble or it's as a trio with TJ and that's the [Rhythm Raptors](http://www.rhythmraptors.com/). The Rhythm Raptors can go up to three to five people, if it's five people and Pokey [Mark Hellenberg] is sitting in with us. You know, Ralph Gordon and Pokey would be the other two.

**Julie Vallimont**

That would be bass and drums.

**Jeff Spero**

Yeah, exactly. So I'm not needed. You know, I can just stop there. I'm not needed. Because you've got you've got Pokey providing as much rhythm as one person could possibly handle. You've got TJ and Ralph who are providing the harmonies.

**Julie Vallimont**

TJ on mandolin and Ralph on bass.

**Jeff Spero**

Yes, exactly on bass right. And then you've got Rodney soaring above with the melody. I'm not really needed in the band. So it's up to me to find places to fit in. In a group like that I'll play very sparsely but if it's just Rodney and I and Rodney is such a powerhouse, to keep up with them, I'm playing pretty thick. I'm playing a lot and I'm hammering away at the keys big time.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, playing with mandolin and bass is fun for the piano because the mandolin is kind of not in the piano's way most of the time, like guitars and pianos can sometimes get in each other's way. But mandolins can be very rhythmic depending on how they're played and then the bass is that low end. So that's also kind of defining the chords that you have to figure out how to work around. But then you can do all these other voicings, you have all these timbre tonal possibilities, where the piano, I think, is pretty important in that setting because that defines the chord voicings and riffs and harmonies and counter melodies and other textures.

**Jeff Spero**

I would agree, I wouldn't say that I don't contribute, I would say that I'm not necessary. They could go on just fine without me, it wouldn't sound the same, because I do contribute. I find it challenging, yes to play with guitarists. I don't think I've played with a guitarist in many, many years. But I also find it challenging sometimes to play with bass and mandolin. My chord progressions can get a little out there. I don't know when they're gonna get out there, I kind of don't have control of it, it's when I start to get bored, playing the same chords over and over again, I mutate. If I'm playing with a mandolin player who is playing chords, there can be a lot of clash. If I'm playing with the bass player there can be a lot of clash and it can be very difficult. I love playing with Ralph. The first time I played with him, was at Cabin Fever in Tennessee, and I had never even met him. And we went and we're having dinner that night and I said, "Well, we need to talk about how we're going to handle you know, this chord thing." Ralph said, "No, we don't, Whatever you play, I'm going to be right there." It was like he was inside my head. So I love playing with Ralph. But it can be it can be challenging playing with with other other musicians who are trying to establish chords.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's just some people where you can have a mind meld or your instincts tend to go in the same directions or they're just good listeners or good followers. I love piano and guitar together. I love it. I love playing with guitarists but it takes a little while of listening and figuring out. There's some guitarists who, we get in this mode where we can read each other's minds or yell things at each other. And then there's some guitarists where it just doesn't seem to fit, like our instincts are different. Like, I'll go high, and they'll go low, so to speak at the same time, and we'll both go in different directions. It's just like you say about finding the right people who you mesh with. That's great that you and Ralph have that, you have that kind of mind meld a little bit it sounds like.

**Jeff Spero**

We do, we do. It's always a huge pleasure playing with him. It's been a while.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, everything's been a while.

**Jeff Spero**

Yeah, exactly. But I hope we get a chance to do that again.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's the beginning of June now as we're recording this and it's an interesting time for the contra world because we don't really have a lot of dances going on, but people are starting to talk about when we might be able to start again. Some things are actually getting scheduled. It's a little, it's crazy to me. More of people that are getting vaccinated and Pinewoods is starting up this summer in a couple of months and it's just interesting. It'll be interesting to see what happens when everything comes back and how we do things differently than before, if at all.

**Jeff Spero**

Right. I am about as excited as one person can be for the end of this month. The Syncopapths are getting together in person. We did one concert. Three of us live in Southern California. We're spread out over a couple 100 miles but the three of us are here in Southern California and Ryan lives up in Tacoma, Washington. We did an hour concerts a year ago, I guess it was last July. The, the brilliant Ian Brehm was able to sync us up. Ryan was up in Tacoma playing and the three of us were down here playing. He could hear us, we could not hear him and it was a challenge. I mean, trying to play when you have three people playing rhythm and chords and your melody player, you're not hearing the melody. It's easy to get lost and we did get lost a couple of times. But it was nice being able to know that we were kind of playing together. But at the end of this month, we're all vaccinated now, and Ryan is flying down to LA and we are going to have gigs online and one in person with dancers.

**Julie Vallimont**

With dancers!

**Jeff Spero**

With dancers, the amount of dancers will be limited. But we are beyond belief excited to be able to get together and play again.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's so wonderful. I can't wait to hear that. We all know, there's a synergy in bands that bring out parts of us that we don't even know we have until we're playing with the other people. And for me, watching the Syncopaths over years, and you guys have been a band for quite a while now. You have a lot of years of playing together and it shows when you play together, you all sync up.

**Jeff Spero**

This November will be 19 years if you count the COVID year as a thing. We started 19, well, at this point 18 and a half years ago. I will say that there is good and bad about being together that long.

**Julie Vallimont**

Sure. Ask any married couple, right?

**Jeff Spero**

Yeah, exactly, or couples that aren't married anymore.

**Julie Vallimont**

Ask anyone who used to be in a band.

**Jeff Spero**

Yep, exactly. We've had, we've had our times, and in a way I think COVID has been amazing for our band. Because we miss each other more than we would have ever considered missing each other prior to not being able to see each other. We no longer take each other for granted. I don't know how much we took each other for granted prior. But now, we now know what we're missing when we're not together and so we are all just so excited. And that band, unlike any other band that I've really been in, the friendships in that band, are what make the music. It's good to be friends with your bandmates. The one thing that that we always hear, when we come off the stage is you guys up there just look like you're having so much fun together, like you really love each other. And we do. There's no other band that I'm in, or have been in that when we get off the stage we want to hang out together the entire time. We never want to separate, it's just a wonderful feeling. When the Syncos were playing LEAF, I remember talking to a musician from another band, it wasn't a contra band and we were just talking about bands. And he was saying the problem with bands is that either you fill up your band with people who you really like and they're your friends but the musicianship is not that great, cuz you're on different levels musically. Or you have bands, who musically you just really sync up together but you just don't like each other that much as people. And he was saying how unusual it was to have a band that plays really wonderfully together and everyone feels like they're in sync with each other and you're really close friends. I'm so happy and feel so incredibly lucky to have that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's, it's an amazing thing and that's just, it's magic when you get that, and you don't always get that. Sometimes it comes and goes even in a band or some people in a band are close and then there's someone who isn't close because personalities or whatever, despite musical chemistry. Sometimes I feel like good bands are miracles, like it's just a miracle that they exist, that you can get a group of people together who click and have the same desires. You also have to want the same things at the same time and you have to be in the same place often enough and so it's just wonderful.

**Jeff Spero**

Yeah, I agree it is pretty much a miracle. It's beautiful when something like that can happen.

**Julie Vallimont**

I guess I mean, a miracle not as much as in like, came down from the heavens, but which I know you don't also mean, but more in the sense that it's just statistically unlikely. Just the odds are slim of all the people in the universe, that people can find each other and yet being steeped in the same traditions certainly helps.

**Jeff Spero**

Well when I think about that band, we're not steeped in the same traditions at all. We have generational things going on as well, when that band first formed we had a member in his 50s, I was in my 40s, Christa was in her 30s and Ryan was in his 20s. When our mandolin player at the time hit 60 we figured he was too old, we kicked him out. Just kidding. We replaced him with a 20 year old mandolinist. So once again, and by that time I was in my 50s, Chris was in her 40s, Ryan was in his 30s and Ashley was in her 20s, I am a little worried. We've got these gigs at the end of the month here on the 25th, the 26th and the 27th of June and my birthday is the 28th and I turn 60. I'm worried that I may have to kick myself out of the band. But I'm hoping that won't be the case, yeah I'll find a hot 20 year old to replace me.

**Julie Vallimont**

Even Thomas Bartlett is too old to replace you now.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm curious to talk about what you're thinking about as a contra dance piano player. You're talking about contra music as being its own genre, which it kind of is, although it's also very loosely defined. Contras one of the things where you know it when you hear it, but it can sound like a lot of different things all at once. But then, there's also just the nuts and bolts of being a pianist playing for dancers, and the kinds of things you're thinking about, and you're also a caller. I often wonder how that affects your musical choices as a player. Can we talk about it from the dancer nuts and bolts ends of things? What are you thinking about as a piano player for dancers?

**Jeff Spero**

When I'm actually playing, while I'm on stage playing?

**Julie Vallimont**

While you're on stage playing or before while you're picking tunes or anything like that.

**Jeff Spero**

When I'm actually playing that presumes I'm actually thinking and I'm not so sure that I am.

**Julie Vallimont**

You don't have to be thinking I guess, there's a lot that's intuitive, right?

**Jeff Spero**

I really do love the act of choosing tunes for dances. That's a big thing for me. For the longest time, I think, especially the Syncopaths relied on me for that very strongly, because I was the only member of the four who danced a lot and who called as well. I chose the tunes most often, in our early years, probably the first decade even I was choosing the vast majority of the tunes but both Ryan and Ashley have gotten really good at it. I will throw in my two cents and sometimes they're, oh sick of those, let's do these instead. They know how I think when it comes to choosing tunes and there are certain things that I look for in the dance. I find it's very important for me to actually look at the caller's card because a caller could say it's very bouncy in the A's and smooth in the B's. We would choose a tune, well not Kitchen Girl because they're really tired of it, although they're probably not tired of it anymore.

**Julie Vallimont**

Isn't this great? All the tunes that get overplayed have all had a really nice break. They're great tunes, that's why a lot of them got overplayed.

**Jeff Spero**

So Kitchen Girl, that it's [plays piano and sings tune.] It's great in the A's if you've got balance and petronella twirls or Rory O'More balances, that kind of thing. It's a great tune for very bouncy A's. If the caller says it's very bouncy in the A's and what the caller doesn't say is yes is very bouncy, the A's, the larks, take four steps in, and then they balance and then as they walk out the Robins take four steps in and they balance well, then all of a sudden, the balances are in the exact wrong part of the tune. Instead of bump bump, it's walk, then balance and that's not what the tune is saying, the tune is saying no, I want to balance at the beginning of the phrases. It's important for me to really look at the cards so I can try to figure out and the things I look at are where it's very bouncy, and where it's very smooth. The bouncy moves are balances, obviously. Long lines forward and back is a very percussive move. I look for very smooth moves like heys or right shoulder rounds, things like that. Those are the kind of moves I think set the tone. And then from there, that's when we choose a tune, we have our setlist divided up into generic tunes that will work for most anything, things that are very bouncy, reels are bouncy, real sort of smooth and on the ones that are bouncy, we say well, where is it bouncy on the tune on our setlist. We can look at our setlist at any point and say, this is the kind of thing we need and we then can choose the tunes. I find that really fun. I really enjoy the the matching of the dances and the tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

I do too. I think people assume that piano players don't care about the dance but there are some of us who really geek out about that. Because you can pick a tune with the right structure like you're talking about, and also like the phrase length, and then you have chordal possibilities so then you can massage the structure of the tune, because sometimes what the dancers aren't always listening to is the notes of the tune. It's the structure of the tune that they're hearing, where it repeats itself, how the phrases build, how long the phrases are. They hear that via the chords a lot of the time. You can also massage a tune. If a tune has short phrases in the B but the dances are long, you can double time the chords and play with harmonic rhythm to make that fit the music of the dance. I love to do that, especially like at the end of a hey, there's some kinds of dances where the dancers have a hard time getting out of the hey into their next move and so I'll use harmonic motion to help get them there to literally cue them when it's time to do that, even if the tune itself doesn't necessarily do that. Stuff like that.

**Jeff Spero**

I agree. I think there are times where you kind of have to go against against the tune to make it fit perfectly or massage the tune maybe is a better way of putting it, I think is what you said. Yeah, absolutely.

**Julie Vallimont**

So in terms of repertoire what kind of tunes do you play on the West Coast? Do you play a lot of traditional New England tunes? Is it things that you'd hear in the Portland Collection? Is it original modern tunes? Is it whatever category you would add that I haven't said?

**Jeff Spero**

I think the answer is yes. I don't think we play a ton of New England tunes, although certainly a lot of it just depends on the influences of the different people in the band. The Syncopaths are definitely a West Coast band, although we're spread throughout the whole West Coast. Ryan plays a lot with Jeremiah [McLane], so he will bring tunes, whether they're tunes that Jeremiah wrote, or tunes that he's playing with Jeremiah, he'll bring back into the Syncopaths. We'll play New England tunes like that. Ryan and Ashley both write a lot of tunes, so we'll play those. I've written a couple. I've written more during the pandemic than I've ever written before in my life. I don't know if we'll be playing them. As a keyboardist, and this is something that I'm sure you're keenly aware of, we can write tunes and have no idea how they fit on a fiddle or a mandolin. They may be just completely dreadful.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely, totally. That's kind of the fun.

**Jeff Spero**

It is. There are a couple people, that when I write a tune, I'll run it past. New England's loss from quite a few years back and now, San Francisco's loss, is Southern California's gain. I run tunes through Audrey Knuth quite a bit.

**Julie Vallimont**

She's always game to play a tune.

**Jeff Spero**

She's only 100 miles away now so she's like a neighbor. She and I have actually played together during the pandemic.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's nice.

**Jeff Spero**

Just wonderful having her down here. Boy, did I stray from that question. We do play original, we play New England. Certainly with Ryan's background, we play Scottish.

**Julie Vallimont**

For the listeners, Ryan's background is he plays a lot of Scottish music and he had a family band, The McKasson Family Band. It's interesting for someone like him who has this deep, traditional background, but then also has a lot of other musical interests and can bring those out in a contra setting. I think Scottish fiddling can work well for contra because it is very rhythmic.

**Jeff Spero**

Prior to playing for contra he would play for Scottish dancing RSCDS dances. So he always had the dance sensibility in him prior to to playing contra. I think we were his first band, I know we were his first band that was formed as a contra band. We've certainly gotten out of that and do a lot of concerts as well, but he hadn't played a ton of contras prior to this. Ashley hadn't played a lot of contras either, she had played with [Jamie Laval](https://www.jamielaval.com/) and they played a few contras here and there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Also a Scottish fiddler.

**Jeff Spero**

Exactly, and Christa [Burch], Christa is just a complete rhythm meister. The first time that I met her it was a big folk weekend that used to happen out here in the LA area called the Summer Solstice weekend. At a hotel at night, a whole bunch of people who were on staff would just gather and play jams all through all through the night. She was on her way to an Irish jam with her bodhrán and she heard [Michael Mendelson](https://www.slidingscalemusic.com/), who's a fiddler, who I've been playing with now for 21, 22 years, I guess. He and I were sitting around a piano in the lobby with Callum McKinnon, who is a wonderful Scottish fiddler from Seattle. We were playing Scottish tunes and Christa walks up and her ears perked up, and she hears thsi Scottish music and she comes over to me, and we'd never met, and she said, So okay, if I sit down here on the piano bench next to you and play bodhrán and I'm, well, yeah, of course it is. We just immediately locked, she pulled out her drum and there's this synergy from the second that we started playing together. So what does she bring to the band as far as genre? She's more steeped in Celtic tradition, Irish more than Scottish so it was all of that. My knowledge of tunes...I'm one of these people that, that Ryan will say, let's play, whatever, and I know I know it because I've heard the title before, but I don't remember how it goes at all. I just say reel or jig what key and off we go and we'll start to play. Once I hear the first couple of notes it's usually oh, yeah, that one. Are you the same way with that? I mean, I think accompanists often aren't as familiar with tune names and things like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I like knowing the names of tunes, and I like collecting them so my brain tends to remember them. But I also find that the database of names and the database of notes are two different databases in my head, and they're not always connected to each other. I could be playing a tune that I've heard a billion times that I definitely know what it's called, but I cannot remember for the life of me what it's called in that moment. Or like you, they'll say, let's play this tune, and then you're like, oh, I know that one but you can't remember for the life of you until someone actually starts it. I think that's I think that's pretty common.

**Jeff Spero**

Although you play melody, because I mean, you play accordion. I would think that you probably be better at that than I. I rarely play melody. My fingering is atrocious.

**Julie Vallimont**

That hasn't stopped a lot of us, that's what marches are for.

**Jeff Spero**

Right, exactly. I will say I take leads, when I take leads, it's not so much the melody, I'm playing around the melody because I just can't play the melody. Marches and waltzes I can often play melody.

**Julie Vallimont**

Have a nice chord solo, I love chords solos. I feel like they're underrated.

**Jeff Spero**

I completely agree. We play Exile of Erin and we go into a vamp on that and it's you know [vamps on chords on piano] I'm just playing chords and that's like the lead for a while. Ten times through we'll finally get back into the melody again. In fact, that was funny because I was dancing with a few people, we had eight of us contra dancing together last weekend for Northwest Folklife. They were playing tunes, and almost every one of them, it's I know that tune, what is that tune, what is that tune? Gigue du salon? No it's not Gigue du salon.What is that tune? Any tune that I did know the name of has now escaped my memory over the last year and a half. I no longer can come up with tune names anymore.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, we'll see how relevant they really are. It's great how people's brains are so different about this, there's fiddlers, I think of some fiddlers from Quebec who have these like repertoires that they've inherited from various families, very specialized repertoires, and they don't know the names of any of these tunes. They'll just pull out tune after tune after tune and not know what any of them are called. It's so amazing, the names are almost irrelevant. The same tune might go by four or five different names, depending on who's calling it what, when. And then there's like, for me, sometimes if I don't know the name of a tune, I forget that I know it when I'm thinking of tunes to play. Somehow having a name for it, even if I've called it something else. It's not even that I'm using a setlist, it's weird. It's just how my brain works.

**Jeff Spero**

I think that's pretty common, though. If I don't know a name, I will often forget that I know the tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's like, if it doesn't have a name, does it exist? It's a deep metaphysical question. Of course it does but we might not remember that we know it somehow.

**Jeff Spero**

For me, often, I can pull up tunes more by their association with people in bands like, where did I learn the tune? Do you ever have like that kind of thing? It's like, if I think of a certain person, I can think of a tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, like state dependent memory or something.

**Jeff Spero**

For example, there's a tune that, that I'm almost positive we got from you and so when I think of you, I think of Pear Tree.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, the Pear Tree, yeah.

**Jeff Spero**

I'm pretty sure we learned Pear Tree from you at LEAF.

**Julie Vallimont**

I remember we were sitting on the grass playing that tune. I have strong associations with learning that tune I learned it from [Adam [Nordell] and Johanna [Davis]](https://sassafrasstomp.com/who-we-are/) at [Maine Fiddle Camp](https://www.mainefiddlecamp.org/) and somebody learned it from, see this is where my brain forgets names. You know, the really famous guy who made all the albums. What's his face?

**Jeff Spero**

Paul McCartney.

**Julie Vallimont**

No, more trad.

**Jeff Spero**

More trad than Paul McCartney.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's on an album by, oh my god. I'm so embarrassed that I'm forgetting his name.

**Jeff Spero**

Jerry Holland.

**Julie Vallimont**

No, less Cape Breton. Oh, oh, I'm so embarrassed that I'm forgetting his name. It's just late. But this is how verbal brains and nonverbal brains work, right?

**Jeff Spero**

It is 11:30 your time zone. So you know, it's later there.

**Julie Vallimont**

But this is why tunes are great is because you can forget all these things about a tune. Like who wrote it, just the name of the guy. I can see the album artwork in my head, which is even funnier because I have a visual memory and I can't remember. Is this gonna come to me as we're talking? I have very strong memories of learning this at Maine Fiddle Camp and just being with friends and I think I was so excited when I learned it that then I wanted to play it with all of you.

**Jeff Spero**

So you had just learned it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, maybe that summer I had learned it or the year before or something and I was just so excited.

**Jeff Spero**

Well, we love that tune we made a set with that tune and Highland Laddie, going from G to A and people just love that set.

**Julie Vallimont**

[sings Highland Laddie]

**Jeff Spero**

The building up from Pear Tree, in the B part into this big, big sounding Highland Laddie is just a great transition.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's fun. What do you think about when you're putting together medleys? I'm changing the subject hoping that then my brain will stop trying to remember his name. Because it's gonna kill me if I don't remember where I learned this tune from, but anyway.

**Jeff Spero**

You can always call me at like two in the morning, three in the morning and say...

**Julie Vallimont**

[Tim O'Brien](https://timobrien.net/)! I knew as soon as we talked about something else my brain would let me find the words, Tim O'Brien is where I know that tune from. Oh, it was driving me crazy. Okay, now we can talk about anything else. Carry on. Wow, my brain is rusty. That's a funny thing to lose. Anyway, where were we, medleys? What do you think about when you're making medleys?

**Jeff Spero**

Well, I guess it depends whether we're making medleys for concert or for dance.

**Julie Vallimont**

For dance to start with.

**Jeff Spero**

Okay, because this is a podcast for contra dance so that would make sense that would be more dance focused, I get that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Then we could talk about what you might do that you wouldn't do for dancing and why?

**Jeff Spero**

Okay, fair enough. For dancing, the things that we look for are key changes, and the feel of the tune, we want similar feels and either we're looking for a very dramatic key changes, or completely non dramatic key change or no key change depending on what kind of dance we might be building it for. If it's like a really smooth dance that has heys and right shoulder rounds, neck circles and no balances we don't really want to have a switch tune, which is going to interrupt the flow, we want to keep a very similar feel for the whole thing so we might not even change keys. Or if we do it's gonna be a key change which is pretty subtle. I love playing jigs for those really smooth dances. I was talking to [Karen Axelrod](https://karenaxelrod.wixsite.com/karenaxelrodmusic) just last week, for her [In the Moment](https://www.hatds.org/ka#history) show I sent her Old Favorite.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, I love that tune.

**Jeff Spero**

Yeah, me too. Karen said that she did not like that tune, but that's because I think she had heard it more of a [dorky, bouncy piano playing]. And for me, it's more like, [smooth, pretty piano playing] I and IV is the A part for me but when it's played like that I think it's just a beautiful, beautiful tune and that for me, is a perfect tune for a hey for four. It's one of those really beautiful smooth and you could go from that into I don't know, I'm not a melody player so I'm trying to come up with a melody. [plays the first few notes of a tune] Cowboy, Cowboy Jig. Just keep keep that feel. I mean, quite often going from the key of G to the key of A can really bring up an excitement level. But if you're doing it in a mellow kind of way like that, it just works beautifully, I think. So when we're coming up with sets, we're trying to match similar feels. Or if we're trying to do something down and dirty, we'll change it up big time just to try to get a whoop from the dancers if it's one of those kind of dances that is very energetic, and we want the dancers to react. The first time that I was with Rodney playing at LEAF he was talking about a medley, and I was saying there's no way, he wanted to pair Catharsis, which is this big, you know, big, bold G minor kind of thing. He wanted to pair it with MacArthur Road in E major.

**Julie Vallimont**

So G minor into E major.

**Jeff Spero**

So for any of the musical geeks out there, there is practically no relationship between G minor and E. That's about as jarring as one could possibly get, there no notes in common in those chords. I looked at him, like, are you completely crazy? But, it's Rodney Miller so obviously, well, he's a little bit crazy. But he knows what he's doing and it was, how are we going to make this work? And he said, well, we make it work by on the switch we don't play the last measure, we leave four beats open and so you're going, [plays piano, driving Gm chords, pauses for 4 beats, then hits a big E major chord] The energy just picks up the room beyond belief, and I couldn't see it. We played it that weekend and the dancers just went nuts, because it's so incredibly unexpected.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely. I mean, I feel like that's a lot of the fun is like setting up expectations and then messing with them, right? That's how humor works, that's how good contra music works.

**Jeff Spero**

I agree completely. But it was something that I would never have come up with on my own. It took the brilliance of Rodney to come up with that one.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's about massaging it. First of all, the two tunes are both reels and they're both very energetic reels so that's enough the same. If you change too many things it will fall apart. Having the space so they're not juxtaposed right next to each other so it's cool instead of jarring. Any of the rules can be broken if you break them in the right ways.

**Jeff Spero**

Exactly. Of course, in something like that the other thing you always have to be careful about is not switching too late in the dance because we've had this happen before, at least I have, where you know if you're playing [piano playing] Dancers hear that and they think okay, the dance is over. Yeah, they stop. The Syncopaths have had that happen on a couple of occasions. When that happens, you just do everything you can to laugh with the dancers, and you start back up again. I remember, once we were playing some weekend, and that happened, I think it was on Cowboy Jig. We came to too much of a rest the second the last time through at the end of the phrase. We started back in and the dancers just started to laugh. We were going into the last time through so we played the last time through and came to a close and then we started back up again. As long as you can play with the dancers it just works great.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think the dancers like knowing that we're human and that we're messing around. Messing around is not the right phrase, but that we're in the moment trying things and experimenting and connecting with them. Even if sometimes it goes wrong, like you don't come up with good ideas if you don't also sometimes have bad ones or if you try to never mess up then you don't get to do anything new.

**Jeff Spero**

That is, I think, one of the most important lessons that that I ever learned as a dance musician and that happens with making sure that you have bandmates who are on the same page of that, giving you the freedom to fall flat on your face, which we've all done. But having bandmates there to pick you up and wanting you to take those risks, that to me is where the magic of the music is when when you're able to feel safe enough to take those musical risks and yeah, sometimes they don't work. Sometimes the dancers notice, but I think the dancers also like that you're out there taking risks as well. That, to me, that's magic, being able to feel safe to put yourself out there and mess up. That's that's where the good stuff comes from.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's when the music feels alive. You can feel the energy when you know the band is doing that and it's exhilarating. The dancers can feed off of that. If you're trying to nail a perfect performance, that can be exhilarating in a different way. But there's just this amazing thing about not knowing what's going to happen next that everybody loves adds this like energy to the air. I love it. And like working with callers like Will Mentor who tend to thrive on that feeling, he'll just start hash calling. He's like, just play a thing, I'll just jump in whatever. We're like, okay, and then if it's [Buddy System](https://buddysystemband.com/), Noah [VanNorstrand] and I don't even have a tune in mind. So I'm like Noah, makeup a tune and so all of a sudden, we're all just literally making something up. You can't do that at every dance all the time but it's so fun to get to, just having that atmosphere and having bandmates where you just know they're gonna have your back. Either they'll help rescue you or they'll go along with it. It's like in the improv world, the phrase, "Yes And" the very classic, well known infamous phrase when somebody comes up with an improv idea, you say yes and then you add to it or contribute to it in some way. That's the magic. Yes and.

**Jeff Spero**

So what would be the musical equivalent? One, four?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, that's the thing, it depends on the musician, right?

**Jeff Spero**

This is true.

**Julie Vallimont**

But I guess the musical equivalent would be like, I'm going to play Old Favorite as a beautiful James Taylor tune and then the other person would be like, no, it's a dorky jig, and they don't come to match where you are, you know? Even better, you could say, well, I'm going to play a James Taylor song and then someone else could be like, well, I'm going to play it like it's a 1980s pop tune and take it even further.

**Jeff Spero**

That is one of the wonderful things is if you start it one way, and then someone else takes it and it goes somewhere completely different. That can be a lot of fun to just see where it goes. You could start Old Favorite as you know [piano playing] and then go [piano playing] it can go wherever it wants to go.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think that's something like when you think about like Karen Axelrod. I feel like she does that a lot in English dances and in contras where all of a sudden it's bluesy for a time that's really fun. There's some piano players who like to do that, and you can pass between different styles. I think it's interesting talking about what the genre of contra music really is. Because I think that definition even has changed and yet it hasn't, like doing these things to contra tunes during a contra dance wasn't necessarily a hallmark of contra dancing X number of years ago.

**Jeff Spero**

I think that changed. I think that the main change of that was Wild Asparagus back in the 80s, they were the ones who I think really started taking the music to different places, and then Hillbillies from Mars, I think, took that and notched that up a little bit. Over the past decade, you have bands like Great Bear and Buddy System that have taken it in, and I don't want to say further, but taking it in other directions.

**Julie Vallimont**

More extreme maybe? Maybe not.

**Jeff Spero**

I don't even know if I would say extreme but I would say it certainly is taking it in other directions, which is just wonderful. It's this progression, it's process is really what it is. It's completely folk process. It's a living tradition.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely, and you get this diversity of bands, all doing different things and some of them are more rehearsed but they're doing new things. That's how I thought of Nightingale playing these incredible arrangements for contra dances . That doesn't mean they don't improvise. That's not what I mean but meaning that a lot of their sound relies on that tight interplay and carefully thought out arrangements or bands like Perpetual Motion, which also relied on that, or Great Bear has these very elaborate arrangements. Then there's other bands that are just improvising, and you never know what's going to happen next, like when I hear the Rhythm Raptors play.

**Jeff Spero**

That's because we don't know, we never rehearse so it's hard for us to know what we're gonna do.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or I think of the [Latter Day Lizards](https://www.latterdaylizards.com/) is the kind of band where you just don't know which direction they're gonna go in. I think of bands like the Syncopaths where I don't know where you sit, it seems like you have arrangements but then you also play with them so I don't know where that sits.

**Jeff Spero**

Well, we don't have very many arrangements, when we have arrangements it's typically for things that we've recorded. Those are arranged for recording, and then we alter those arrangements for dance. But most of the other things, and I will say, yeah, some of the tunes we've been playing for a long time, we've kind of settled into patterns. Then we get sick of those, we just want to break out of it, we are an ADHD band. We just get tired of doing the same thing. So there's a tune set from maybe our first recording, Ryan will say, okay, let's play these tunes but let's just not play it that way, do something different. Let's do something different with it. We won't even know what that something different is. I'll hit the the four potatoes and then it's up to us to try to figure out okay, how are we going to make it different this time. So no, we don't really rely on arrangements at all, we're much better off the cuff, we get our energy from having no idea what we're doing. That's always been the band, is that we never know what we're doing and so we all feel like we're kind of just holding on for dear life.

**Julie Vallimont**

The magic of a band where you've have played together a lot and you're in sync with each other. Pun, I guess, partly intended, is that you can make it sound like it's arranged even though you're coming up with the arrangement in the moment, it still sounds like a band maybe because you've all carved up musical space for each other and you know how to play together. Some of you know to drop back when other people are doing new ideas to give them space or whatever it is that you do so you can still sound like a band and not a free for all while you're coming up with new ideas.

**Jeff Spero**

I think that's definitely it. The nice thing about playing for dances, is that while we're trying to figure out what we're going to do with the tune, that takes one or two times through the dance, and the dancers aren't really listening to what you're doing at that point, because they're concentrating on the dance. So as long as you keep it danceable, while you're figuring out how you want to play the tune, then it works. So after maybe two or three times, it's like, okay, this is how we want to approach the tune this time. We'll have it figured out by the time that the dancers start listening. I use the word listening in quotes, because I don't feel that the dancers really listen to the music and that's not a knock on the dancers. It's that I think it's just the fact that the dancers can actively listen to the music, and then give adequate attention to the partners, their neighbors and the dance itself. I think the dancers feel the music. I think they feel it very strongly but it's not an active listening. I know I feel that way when I'm on the dance floor as well. I can feel the music and if the if the feel changes, I feel that and if there's a note that seems really, whoo, that was interesting or chord progression that's different, ooh, I like that. But most of the time, I'm paying much, much more attention to the people I'm dancing with. I'm thinking about the dance itself, and I'm just feeling the music. That's not a knock on the dancers and I don't think it's uncommon that people aren't listening. I think mostly people feel the music and not listen while they dance. their

**Julie Vallimont**

Their minds are elsewhere, they also have a caller to deal with. Ideally, they're talking to each other sometimes because it is a social dance form and you're paying attention to the people in the room around you.

**Jeff Spero**

Just don't tell the callers that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, no, they only listen to the caller at all times.

**Jeff Spero**

Exactly and they never talk amongst themselves, they're only listening to the caller.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh,absolutely, and they always pay attention during the walkthrough.

**Jeff Spero**

Absolutely, because the caller is the most important person there.

**Julie Vallimont**

Nice. Are there any other things that you want to mention or bring up before we finish up?

**Jeff Spero**

Probably at three in the morning, I'll give you a call and say, can we start this up again? I've got a few things.

**Julie Vallimont**

Just like I remembered Tim O'Brien's name 15 minutes later.

**Jeff Spero**

Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, it's been wonderful talking with you about all this and just hearing your perspective, I really appreciate it.

**Jeff Spero**

Well, thank you. It's been wonderful talking to you. I really look forward to the days when we can actually meet each other in person and listen to each other's music live again, I missed that. I just love the way you play. I think there's this thing with musicians that...I know when I listen to people like you play and I listen to other wonderful pianists and there's that natural tendency to, I wish I could do that, oh, I wish I could do that, you know, I'm not good enough. But at the same token, it's just so wonderful to hear the other musicians playing and I love the way you play. I love listening to Buddy System, I love listening to you, and any form of dancing and other musicians that you're playing with. I look forward to when that can happen again.

**Julie Vallimont**

Me too. And that's very kind of you. I mean, I do that too. I listen to people and say, I'm not good enough. I want to learn all these things and I think that's the magic, is that we're all doing that to each other.

**Jeff Spero**

Yeah, we are, we are. The funny thing with the Syncopaths is that we all felt that way about the band. That we felt like the band was at this one level, and we were all just hanging on, and that each individually...and we didn't know this about the other until we talked about this at one point. Each one of us had this, I'm not good enough to be in the band, the band is better than I am kind of thing. It was kind of funny.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, to turn that around a good band is better than all of us, right? But a good band brings out the best of us. Just like hearing other musicians can bring out the best of us because it inspires us to dust off our chops or practice a little more, learn new things. Having that commitment to quality is what keeps us improving the tradition and innovating within it.

**Jeff Spero**

The trick is doing that without letting the self doubt get in the way,

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, you still have to have fun. We have to remember this is fun, gosh, darn it.

**Jeff Spero**

Right. Exactly. The I'm not worth things do creep into the mind at times. The trick is getting past that and just saying, you know what, I'm just gonna go out and have fun. Exactly what you said.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's about not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good.

**Jeff Spero**

Yup. Absolutely.

**Julie Vallimont**

And we're gonna have fun soon enough. Well, thank you so much Jeff for your time. I really appreciate it.

**Jeff Spero**

Thank you, Julie. Wonderful to talk to you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Take care.

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