**Contra Pulse Episode 32 – Larry Unger**

**Julie Vallimont**

Welcome to Contra pulse. This is Julie Vallimont. This episode I sit down with multi-instrumentalist and composer Larry Unger. Larry has been a full-time musician since 1984, and he has presented a diverse range of music at contra, Scottish and English dances, music camps, festivals, coffee houses and concerts all across North America and abroad. You might have heard his guitar, banjo, or bass playing in bands like notorious, Big Table, The Reckless Ramblers, and Uncle Gizmo. Larry also gives solo concerts that include a wide variety of music: finger-style blues and slide guitar, rags, old-time banjo tunes, original waltzes and fiddle tunes. He likes to play a number of unusual instruments such as banjo guitar, fretless banjo, jaw harp and piano harp.

**Julie Vallimont**

Larry has composed more than 5000 tunes, many of which have been recorded by his bands or by other groups. His tunes are widely played at contra dances everywhere and he’s published three books of original tunes and two entire CDs of original waltzes (with Ginny Snowe). His compositions and recordings have been featured in four different Ken Burns television documentaries, on the Grand Ole Opry,, and by the San Luis Obispo Symphony Orchestra, to name a few.

**Julie Vallimont**

This episode comes to you out of the Contra Pulse VAULT. It was recorded in 2019, in the early days of this project pre-Covid when I was still going to people’s homes to chat and recording our interviews in a video format. Because the original end-goal of this interview was not a podcast, the audio quality is a little hard to hear at times. If you have any trouble understanding our fascinating conversation you can find a full transcript of the interview on the show website: cdss.org/contrapulse. As a plus, we recorded video examples of Larry’s guitar playing that are available on the Contra pulse website. Hope you enjoy.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, hi, Larry. Thanks for being here.

**Larry Unger**

Oh, hi.

**Julie Vallimont**

So we're here today to talk about contra dance music and your role in it and some thoughts about it and your playing style and how it has changed. We were just talking about tunes and you were mentioning [the David Millstone documentary about Bob McQuillen] "[Paid to Eat Ice Cream](https://www.davidmillstonedance.com/video)" and that documentary and how you would have one tune that goes with one dance.

**Larry Unger**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Which, I think there's a wonderful familiarity that comes with that for the dancers and for the musicians where you get to know the tune and get into it. I don't know, what are your thoughts about that and how that has changed and how do you see your role in the contra community? Those are big questions.

**Larry Unger**

Big questions. Well, what do I think about that? What if I was [Bob McQuillen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bob_McQuillen) and I had to play Chorus Jig twice a night or once a night for four nights a week? Well, I might have been glad in 1971 or whenever they decided that they could have a medley. I like that tune, Chorus Jig. I like most of the chestnuts but you know, truth is we haven't played Rory O'More lately, or Petronella. We don't play them anymore anyway. So did I answer that question? Maybe, I like medleys, but I would say...when I started, a lot of the callers, say Ted Sannella for instance, a very popular caller, very good caller. He would go around driving the whole week before his gig with the band and listen to their recordings, and then pick the tunes for you. Mary DesRosiers used to pick the tunes. That's what they used to do, they used to pick the tunes. He was doing you a favor because he was picking the tunes that he knew....

**Julie Vallimont**

That he’d know would be a good fit for the dance and that you like to play.

**Larry Unger**

But, now this isn't about him, it's just in general. Maybe you don't feel like playing it that day. We musicians have gotten fussy and we want to play what we want to play and we think we know how to play for dancing. So that's how it's changed. Musicians have tried to take over control from the callers when it comes to the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, when [Dudley [Laufman]](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/dudley-laufman/) does a dance, he picks the tunes and the dances and he plays the tunes and calls the dances.

**Larry Unger**

Dudley had something to do with introducing new tunes into the repertoire. So he's kind of gone up back against that, in a way.

**Julie Vallimont**

So what was it like when you were in that contra scene? How did you get started doing all this?

**Larry Unger**

That's a long story. Well, I had moved to Boston and I was playing a lot of old time music with the people who were jamming and somehow I fell in with them. That's my favorite fiddle music, playing old time music, by the way, and that influences the way I backup tunes for future reference. So anyway, I was there somewhere, I mean, I was in Harvard Square or something and I saw a sign, "Join the [Folk Dance Group "Mandala](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandala_folk_dance_ensemble)," international folk dance. So I joined, I auditioned and I somehow got in as a musician for the international folk dance group. Right away I was playing Sanders Theater [at Harvard University] on bass, which they had just given me three days earlier. One of the early gigs was at [NEFFA](https://www.neffa.org/), so let's say 1978. I went to the theater there and then I went to some of the dances, they were fun. So I started going to the contra dances, met some people and I started playing bass. The Nashtones, [Dave Langford](https://www.latterdaylizards.com/bio) and Sarah Seward.

**Julie Vallimont**

Was that old time music?

**Larry Unger**

No, it's what Dave Langford plays...

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, Dave's brand of fiddle music...

**Larry Unger**

He plays old time, but he does other stuff too. To make this story short, Dave had arm problems, Sarah left town, so I had some few gigs and I needed a fiddler and I decided ...and found Amy Richardson, [now] Amy Larkin. And we started Uncle Gizmo. We started playing with Sam Bartlett some and it's just a fluke that I started touring. Because I was going to old time fiddle conventions in North Carolina, I just started doing that. Anyway, by a fluke, I got booked at the Black Mountain Festival, which is now [LEAF](https://theleaf.org/).

**Julie Vallimont**

Right!

**Larry Unger**

I didn't even have any gigs that were hardly contra dance gigs but I contacted them, I said, okay, I'm going to do a tour on the way and I caught up with the Glen Echo people, I said, you don't know me, but I'd like to have this band with Amy and [Charlie Pilzer](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-2-charlie-pilzer-pt1/) as a bass player. I knew Charlie and Charlie said yes so we got that gig and then I started calling people, "Well we have the DC gig can we get the Baltimore gig? The Philadelphia gig? You don't know me but I have a DC gig..." And all the North Carolina gigs because I was in Black Mountain, which was two weekends at that time. I went from zero or almost zero conta dance gigs to a five week tour and we were very popular on that tour, we were very successful. All of a sudden, six months later, we had dance weekends. After that point, I was playing coffee houses, I love playing coffee houses I love playing blues guitar and banjo tunes but the gigs just, kind of just came in. Through a fluke I got, and when we were at Black Mountain and Ginny Snowe was...became our bass player and then she moved to the West Coast and then that same thing happened out there. I got some gigs on the West Coast and they liked us and all sudden you have dance weekends everywhere within two years. There weren't as many touring bands so it was a little easier.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you were in demand.

**Larry Unger**

I started touring voraciously, but not playing for many local dances. Because at the time guitar was not popular, was not considered traditional.

**Julie Vallimont**

How the tides have turned.

**Larry Unger**

They happen to have a quota on how many guitar bands could play per year, it was a very small number. Okay, I think it was two per quarter. So that meant I didn't have very many local gigs.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you say they had a quota?

**Larry Unger**

The committee.

**Julie Vallimont**

At the [Scout House](http://concordscouthouse.org/)?

**Larry Unger**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or what was the Thursday dance?

**Larry Unger**

The Thursday dance...

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, which was the VFW at the time.

**Larry Unger**

If I was depending on that for gigs, I would have been angling...I'm touring all over the country by a fluke so I didn't let it get to me. I just did that. I would just say that what is traditional? Traditional is whatever you started, when you started, so the people that were booking, that goes back to McQuillen and the piano. But before that they had brass bands, you know, 23 years ealier. So I mean what is traditional? So for me, traditional is not what we hear now. But did you ask me what is traditional?

**Julie Vallimont**

No, but I will if you didn't, so this is a great place to talk about this.

**Larry Unger**

I don't know if I answered your question. You asked me like seven things.

**Julie Vallimont**

They're just conversation starters.

**Larry Unger**

Anyway, that's sort of how I got started, just by a fluke. And all of a sudden I was getting a lot of dance gigs and it was easier to book contra dances. Of course I liked it. I like them both.

**Julie Vallimont**

What do you like about playing for dancers?

**Larry Unger**

Well, there's a lot of energy. I've been lucky plus to play with a lot of really great fiddlers. I haven't been shy about asking anyone to work with them so... Whereas at a coffee house, when you go to a concert, I would be less likely to just ask anyone. So the one thing is I've played with really great fiddlers, that's exciting. That's not your question about dance. But, of course, you get the energy from the dancers.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think that is one of the magics of the way dances in New England have worked is a pickup band, or you can ask someone to play with you and you're kind of getting to know each other on stage.

**Larry Unger**

Because we don't practice ahead of time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, some bands do now.

**Larry Unger**

Sure, it's good to practice ahead of time, but you couldn't get through a gig without practicing and of course, it's helped my ear to just play on stage.

**Julie Vallimont**

I feel like in a way, you should be able to get through a gig without having to practice. If there is anything that's like what is traditional, right, but modern day traditional, what we consider traditional is a model where people can get up on stage, have a core repertoire of tunes and figure out how to play together and not have to rehearse in advance.

**Larry Unger**

Which goes back to the days of limited repertoire and they didn't have to practice really in a way either, because they had to learn Chorus Jig. If they couldn't play that then they're not gonna have fun, but if they can, then they can all play.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. There's a limited number of tunes you have to learn and then once you learn them, you know, if you show up, you're pretty much all set.

**Larry Unger**

Now today are there are thousands and thousands of tunes, I don't know them all. The more things I do with more fiddlers the more likely I'm exposed to them. But being a tune writer, a lot of my bands have played my tunes, so then I kind of like, don't hear all the tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, you know, it's like I was playing in the NEFFA Festival Orchestra and they're like, I don't want to practice because I know that Charlie's gonna pick tunes that are common enough that people will, you would know most of them.

**Larry Unger**

You are backing up, so you don't have to know the melody.

**Julie Vallimont**

I was actually a melody player, believe it or not. Bruce Rosen was anchoring on piano and I was on the accordion.

**Larry Unger**

But some people, they don't want to just jump in if they don't know the melody. So as you know, at a dance with a pickup situation, the melody players say to each other, well, what do you know, what do you know? And then they try to find something that they both at least sort of know rather than someone just stone cold not knowing it. However, the rhythm players, they might not have you ever heard it and they just start anyway.

**Julie Vallimont**

You kind of guess at the chords and sometimes you're wrong and then you get more and more right and less and less wrong, the more times you play through the tune.

**Larry Unger**

Or you get used to the bad sound.

**Julie Vallimont**

So I've seen...yes, you think you have it right too and you don't know you don't have it right until later.

**Larry Unger**

Charlie Pilzer. I played with him at NEFFA and he had the sheet music to this tune that I have always played. I'm like, that's how it's supposed to go? I never play that chord.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well what's "supposed to" right?

**Larry Unger**

The guy who wrote it...wrote out the music.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, well, the folk process has to have a role there somewhere too, right? So there's this trend towards going from dances that had tunes that went with them and anyone could show up and play, to now there are some touring bands that have a very specialized repertoire, bands like [Perpetual e-Motion](https://www.facebook.com/PerpetualeMotion/), or [Great Bear Trio](https://www.greatbearmusic.com/), they're playing very specialized tunes, a lot of which they've written themselves, sometimes they're not playing tunes at all, really specialized arrangements. Nobody could sit in, and if they did, it would kind of ruin the sound. There are a lot of bands that are in the middle. I do both of those things. So it's not a value judgment, you sort of write a lot of your own tunes and play those. I feel like some of what [Notorious](https://www.larryunger.net/music/bands/) has played over the years is kind of specialized, and some of it is just really good old time tunes played really well. What are your thoughts about that change that's happened? Any thoughts, you don't have to have an opinion on it...

**Larry Unger**

Well, if I were dancing, not playing, like anyone in the world, I have my own tastes and I like some things better than others. It's not a value judgment. It's just music that moves me and moves me to move. That's what I like to dance to more. So I'm more inclined to enjoy dancing to a real melody, and have a beat that you can sort of hear. So that's my opinion as a dancer. Now, everyone has their own thing that moves them. So now, what is my opinion as a musician? This goes back decades, even in Uncle Gizmo my second band I was in, we played a lot of tunes I had written. Once we had this festival gig, and the caller said, oh, I'm comfortable with my musicians who usually work with me so can they sit in? We had practiced our set, because it was a big festival. And all of a sudden, we can't play any of those tunes so it was kind of rough. Not the playing, because we found tunes to play together, just the compromising discussion with the caller. Anyway, I think something is lost by not having at least some of the music that you play, be accessible to everybody and not just a whole show. Because I think the more that the band is like about themselves, the less it is about the dancers and the whole experience. Years ago people were discussing the clapping for contra dance. How do you feel about clapping?

**Julie Vallimont**

Like after Petronella?

**Larry Unger**

Yeah. This one musician I know and respect said, they're kind of messing up the music, because you're playing this very sweet jig and then they clap. And I said, "Well, are we playing for dancers?" I mean, that's one time when an audience is on the beat. So I think it's great to practice despite what happened earlier in this conversation. You should practice on your own for sure, it's better to practice together. But if you can't just play together, at least some of your gig...you're losing something.

**Julie Vallimont**

Some in a night, you might do a little bit of both?

**Larry Unger**

Right. Well, I always want to do old time because that's my favorite music so I'd never get away from that. I had a gig in California with this fiddler, nice person, talented. She said, oh, let's play all your tunes today. So we did the whole dance just my tunes. If she told me ahead of time, I would have thought about what to put with what. But I didn't, so I'm like going through my book, madly looking for a tune that goes with the one that said "Oh, I like to do this." It was sort of fun, but it wasn't my most enjoyable experience. We all like to play things we are comfortable with, the first dance of the night, I like to play something well known or at least, that has some recognizable beat. Yeah, and then you're almost like, boom, boom, hit them over the head. I don't know about this, hitting them over the head, I think you're trying to just enhance their experience, really.

**Julie Vallimont**

For someone who has definitely used the phrase "hitting them over the head," I think that's a fair thing to say. A lot of different ways to do it, that's what's interesting that you have this set of limitations musically. Like you have to have a certain number of bars, and you have to have a certain kind of rhythm and a certain kind of phrasing, ideally, to make it work for the dancers and a certain kind of energy. But within that, there's a lot of freedom. I imagine you have a natural intuition as a dance musician, like playing old time tunes, you figured out how to adapt them for contra dancing, and which ones are best. Everyone talks about the horror stories of old time bands who play for contra dancing, who don't understand how to do them, they stand in a circle on stage, and don't look at the dancers and play way too slow, or way too fast. But you probably figured all that out, maybe on your first tour when you had to.

**Larry Unger**

Once again, I feel like I'm a little bit noticing what's going on in the world. But some of it is a matter of taste. For years, my favorite band was the [Horseflies](https://www.thehorseflies.com/) and then all of a sudden, they start a band with a different name [Big Table], and I'm in the band with them and we're playing this rhythm that just moves me a certain way. But yet, some of the dancers would come and say, can't you play a jig or something? So who is right? Well, they both are. Because that's a band I would dance to them anytime, all the time. I wouldn't care about no jig for the whole evening. But is the dancer right to say whether or not [they're] paying attention to us? I have to say that, [Judy [Hyman]](https://www.judyhyman.com/), the fiddler from Horseflies, she watches the dance, it's very important. She picks slow or fast or various adjectives. She's very much more aware than some of the other old time bands I know, who with them, the dancers are a little bit of a nuisance but they like the opportunity to play music. So I can't go 100% with what you said. I stand up for the old time musicians.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely, well as do I. I love old time, I was playing devil's advocate a little bit. I love old time music for contra dances. I think some of those tunes work really well and are beautiful and I think there's lots of great examples of that.

**Larry Unger**

I'll have to just say that sometimes I am stumped by a tune that to me is so obvious and so square the phrasing and then people come up and say I don't hear the phrasing in old time tunes. They'll pick a dance that we just played and I was like, that's the most square tune there is. I feel like I'm aware but sometimes I'm mystified by people's complaints because it's just seems I don't get it.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think I've had that happen with French tunes. Sometimes I like to play French tunes for contra dances. A tune that I think is very simple and well phrased, our caller couldn't hear where the phrases were at all, she got really baffled. Out of many callers I've only had one person have that extreme experience. But I think it's like the patterns are a little unusual and to us like you know those patterns so well.

**Larry Unger**

Well, there's this one tune of mine called The Judge.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's a great tune.

**Larry Unger**

It has the B part bum, bum, bum...and if there's a balance there, great. But the caller, the first time through, heard the beat, one beat off. So the caller, who's a well known caller and a good caller was calling late. He thought one of those notes was a pickup or something, I don't know. So now I'm speaking to you and your question. If the caller got on the wrong foot from the very beginning, I can understand that they'd be off even if it seems like that's the easiest tune in the world to hear.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of your tunes have become...they're just part of the common repertoire now, which is pretty cool. Like, what is traditional, right? When I was learning to play for contra dances some of your tunes were what I learned, as what people played around me in the Boston scene. The band that taught me how to play for contras was playing like, The Judge and Curvy Road to Corinth and we still play Door County #2, which is like, one of your hit wonders.

**Larry Unger**

The tune that came back.

**Julie Vallimont**

Did it go away?

**Larry Unger**

Kinda.

**Julie Vallimont**

How so?

**Larry Unger**

Well, you know, I have a book that I sell. My first band with Dave Langford we used to play that tune. That was the Nashtones and then you put out a book, you don't know what people play, right? People buy your book and you don't know what they play. You don't know what gets played. But years later, I was on tour, I was in Alaska, actually, with this other band. The flute player in the band said, and she always liked to just read through music, she said let's just read through some tunes. I was like, okay, I had my book. I was like, you probably wouldn't like this because it doesn't have many notes and she's a flute player and she wants kind of like, quirky tunes, but she played it and she really liked it so she insisted that that band learn that tune. And then we recorded it. So this is, by now, it's 20 years ago, but it was 10 years that no one played it and then we played a lot, we recorded it. I suppose, through the recording, people learned it and then secondhand after that. Now it's just out there, so can't be stopped in a way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's just floating around. Beth Cohen's was played a lot, especially for a while.

**Larry Unger**

So Beth Cohen's, I can just tell you that the first time we played that for a gig, we were in San Francisco. The caller, a very good caller from San Francisco was calling the dance and it was kind of falling apart. The fiddler, Amy, said, we have to switch tunes, this tune doesn't work for dances. We're having this conversation while we're playing. This tune sucks for dancing, whatever she said. I said, let's just play it one more time Because the caller, it wasn't working. Because what happens if you call, the walk-through doesn't go well, and then it's falling apart? I mean, that happens to every caller. So we stuck to it and I think that if I had just let it go, that would have been the end of that tune. It's kind of a fluke. Now I'm not wanting to like push my tunes in your face, but I just wanted to play it one more time before we gave up on that situation.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, any new tune you have to like break it in for awhile and you have to try it in a variety of situations.

**Larry Unger**

That might not work. Yeah, you write tunes, and still might be a good tune and even if it's not a good tune, whatever that means, it's a good experience writing it.

**Julie Vallimont**

You can use it for something else or not, right? Then maybe it isn't a good dance tune, like I've written a few tunes where I bring them to a fiddler and they're like "that is way too syncopated to play for contra dance, like the bowings don't work with the kind of rhythms I want to do." It's like okay, cool.

**Larry Unger**

So, in the past, I had a history of being in nine bands at a time. I'm not in so many bands now but I would bring a tune to a fiddler and if they didn't like it, no big deal because I had other fiddlers to work with. So it wasn't so important to me that this one fiddler learned all my tunes, because I had other outlets for them.

**Julie Vallimont**

What do you think makes a good contra tune?

**Larry Unger**

You've been waiting to ask me that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or maybe it's such a broad question, I mean, there's a lot of different ways to approach it.

**Larry Unger**

Tunes that are hard to dance to are ones that kind of go over the edge of the phrases, go over the measures in an odd way, or you can't tell is that a pickup note, or is that the first note of the piece? So it's, it's more about phrasing. Myself, even though I'm an improviser, I play with improvisers. When fiddlers get too far away from the melody and they're just in la la land I don't enjoy it as much as a dancer.

**Julie Vallimont**

There's something about the flow of the tune that's like a river that carries you along. Now what about...I mean [Eden [MacAdam-Somer]](https://edenmacadamsomer.wordpress.com/biography/) improvises all the time...or maybe I just think too much.

**Larry Unger**

She improvises.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is it a certain kind of improvising or how long you improvise for? Where does that line happen for you?

**Larry Unger**

Now I'm going to speak in general, even though you're on stage doesn't mean that everything you're doing is what you love the most to dance to. You're just one person on stage and you're trying to play together. As far as Eden and improvising. I feel like it's really good but also, I'm playing rhythm and I never let go of that. So whether she's playing, or whether she's not playing, I like to feel like people could follow it anyway.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely.

**Larry Unger**

As far as improvising goes, even if you're drummer playing a drum solo, you have to play with phrasing, even if you're playing a jaw harp solo. If it's just dadadada you don't know where the beat is. So you have to have dum, dum. So you have to improvise with phrasing to make it easier to follow as a caller and as a dancer.

**Julie Vallimont**

And, Eden in this case, is free to do all these amazing things she can do because you are providing the rock solid...

**Larry Unger**

I like to think so.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, that's what you're known for so, you can be modest, but I'll say you're providing this rock solid bassline or like this foundation, which includes really good rhythm but also a chordal structure that's phrased that people can follow. It's like almost a subliminal thing. I think somebody told me once when I was learning to play rhythm, they'll hear the tune, but they're dancing to the rhythm, like what the rhythm instrument is doing. That's actually what they're dancing to, somehow the tune is still important, though. I've tried, like when I've experimented with techno contra, taking out the tune, and it's never as satisfying as when there's a tune in there.

**Larry Unger**

People can dance to it, but it's not as satisfying, at least to you.

**Julie Vallimont**

At least to me and to some of the dancers I talked to but there are other people who love dancing to music without tunes and so I play music without tunes sometimes, and I enjoy that. But there's just something about the tune that keeps me coming back to it.

**Larry Unger**

Well, what brought you to the music in the first place? The tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right and having a common language that people can speak, which, to me is important. You're the kind of person who is a rhythm player, mostly, at least in the contra world. That's how people perceive you. But you're also a melody player, you know tunes and you write them and you understand them and you can play them like on banjo or probably 800,000 other instruments if you wanted to.

**Larry Unger**

At least.

**Julie Vallimont**

At least, counting individual jaw harps. Why do you mostly play rhythm for contras, is it that guitar is your main instrument?

**Larry Unger**

It's what I'm most comfortable. If I had five guitar bands and then one banjo band where I just played banjo or just played melody all the time, as much melody as a banjo can play, I would be happy with that one band. As far as melodies, like playing a lot of guitar leads, I'm really not that interested. I like to play fingerstyle blues than play melodies. At home, I'll do anything, I'll play the fiddle, I'll play the accordion. I'll play the piano. I'll play anything to make up melodies.

**Julie Vallimont**

When you're writing tunes?

**Larry Unger**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, it's fun to use that as a device too, like different...I don't know, if you have this, a lot of people say that when they write a tune on a different instrument, it comes out differently. Every instrument has its own patterns and sounds and different sounds inspire different things. Why do you write contra tunes, they just come out of you? You enjoy it?

**Larry Unger**

I write all kinds of tunes. So what inspires me to write, well, music that I already know. What do I play the most of? Contra dance. So when do I have the most ideas to write a tune? During the walkthrough.

**Julie Vallimont**

I've seen that happen so many times.

**Larry Unger**

Some really rousing piece, and I have all these notes in my head. The melody plays, and we're like, what we're going to do next? I'm just like, I was just playing little scales to myself making up tunes, because I'm inspired by what just happened. Now, why do I write contra dance tunes? I try to write anything and I used to have this habit and I'll get back to it, I swear, is when I had breakfast I would put on a record of something and it could be Sousa marches. It could be piano rags. It could be bossa nova, whatever. I'd listen to that music for a half hour, whatever. Then I'm going to immediately try to write something in that style and that worked, a lot. The truth is I write to rhythm. So I'm playing something and I'm not like, what note is next? I'm just playing. What is easiest to play? Well, maybe old time fiddle tunes they have less notes. Maybe waltzes that you're playing those slower? Not tangos. Some things that are less technically challenging, are easier to write so I write more of them. Doesn't mean I just write that. Some of my tunes are technically challenging and I play them once so they can't be that hard but, I'm not playing them up to speed, just adding a rhythm.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you always write tunes on an instrument with an instrument in your hand?

**Larry Unger**

99% of the time, but sometimes I'll sing to the dryer or some drone note. The lawnmower.

**Julie Vallimont**

Anything with some kind of pitch that you can drone over. It's a great way to write a tune.

**Larry Unger**

I'm not so inspired by my singing now, more about playing.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think there's something accessible about a lot of your tunes.

**Larry Unger**

They're not all easy on the fiddle, but maybe I wrote a phrase on piano that has arpeggio that's easy. Or you know the accordion, it's easy. On the fiddle it might be hard, but in general, they're pretty accessible, at least on some instrument. And then I always say if one note is hard on one instrument, not on the other, change it for your instrument. I don't care. You know what I mean?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Because you have to adapt the tune to fit the instrument. I call it breaking in a tune. I'm not nearly the tunesmith that you are but if I write a tune, I have to bring it to the fiddlers and bring it to whoever else I'm playing with and have them adapt it. Gotta break it in. Because the folk process will take an average of your tune it. The way people play the tune will be an average of all the ways that people play it in a jam or whatever.

**Larry Unger**

Or the version that you like, or don't like.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or a version that you hate that someone shares.

**Larry Unger**

You got no control over it.

**Julie Vallimont**

There is a version, a couple of versions going around, and some tunes where like, half the notes are missing. I think the original tune is better. But this new version, once it's not my tune, but once it's out there, you can't take it back.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, maybe now's a good time to get out some instruments and we can play a little bit, or you can play a little bit.

**Larry Unger**

Whatever you want

**Julie Vallimont**

Musical examples.

**Larry Unger**

I think people...well when they play, just in general, this is true but when they improvise, sometimes they go beyond what people can dance to. Not can,...but makes it easier. I don't always enjoy the improv but dancers sometimes seem to love it anyway. I wasn't saying negative about Eden. You can't name any fiddler that I'm going to say I love everything that person does.

**Julie Vallimont**

But I think also it's fun to find those boundaries. A lot of experienced musicians, I know were playing with those boundaries. Like what can I do and have it still be dancable. And you don't know for sure until you've gone too far. But then there are some people who just in the habit of constantly going past the boundaries, because they don't care or are aware of it, or are caught up in the moment or whatever.

**Larry Unger**

I used to play with [Nat Hewitt](https://www.cdss.org/community/blog/celebrating-the-spirit-and-legacy-of-nat-hewitt/). Nat, people loved his fiddling and his improv. He's very good at it. Just once in a while he had a problem of being a beat off or two beats off. He gets so deep into his improv that he didn't know where he was. I'd always have to say, B1 or whatever. But he always would believe me because I'm just playing the beat so I can keep track easier.

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly. That's like your job is to know where where everyone is. Was that a problem or did you just kind of accept that as part of what it was like to play with him?

**Larry Unger**

It would have been a problem if he didn't believe me, but he always did. So, no, it was not a problem.

**Julie Vallimont**

If it wasn't easy to get him back on track, it would have been a lot harder.

**Larry Unger**

As a band member you cover for each other...[Larry tunes guitar] Many years ago, there was a solo, Cajun triangle CD that came out.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's amazing, Christine Balfa? I can't say I've listened to it from start to finish.

**Larry Unger**

Well, so me talking about guitar backup would sort of be like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Hearing only the backup without the tune will sound like an album of solo triangle is what you're saying?

**Larry Unger**

Triangle doesn't have a lot of notes that you can tell the difference between, you're either...you're dampening it or you're not.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, those are your two choices. [Larry warms up on guitar.]

**Larry Unger**

Well I don't even know what I'm going to play. When I say what I like to do it's not that I'm dissing the other styles...It's just what I like and what's me...

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Larry Unger**

I'll just tell you it's all bass, because I like polkas and polkas go boom-chuck, boom-chuck, boom-chuck...

**Julie Vallimont**

Haha that's great

**Larry Unger**

...or New Orleans jazz, [sings rhythm], and that changed to swing [sings and plays swing bassline on guitar] which is not as interesting as that [plays boom-chuck back up] to me. They're both good.

**Julie Vallimont**

So we were talking a bit about the kind of tunes, the kind of playing so can you show us a little bit about your rhythm style and kind of tell us where it came from?

**Larry Unger**

The fiddle music I first loved had a back-up like this, with bass runs [Larry plays a simple boom-chuck guitar back up] I like still to play that. I think it's important to have both, the boom, if you don't have a bass player you got to have that [Larry plays guitar back up with strong downbeat] and the strummy strummy thing [Larry strums] I feel less of a beat as a musician, as a dancer. So I want to hear [Larry plays both halves together] both sounds. The bass and the strum. Now if you're playing at a dance [Larry continues playing] you might do something to indicate the next phase starting, which I just did. I do that all the time subconsciously.

**Julie Vallimont**

Before the phrase?

**Larry Unger**

Exactly. That's like when the caller is about to call something or if they stop calling, I still kind of give that clue or maybe I'm giving a clue to my bandmates. The next part...the A part's starting again or halfway through whatever. So that's how my love of old time [Larry strums.] I play a lot of tunes like this. Now when you're playing Irish music you know, people want strummy strummy, [Larry strums double time] it's not really Irish sounding when I do it...But I know left hand chords [Larry strums] they're trying to imitate the DADGAD, the alternate tuning style. Someone said that I have the left hand of a Celtic player and the right hand of an old time player, they put that in a dance flyer 30 years ago, and they're probably right. So I know 1000 ways to play a G chord. [Larry strums on G chord] Whatever, especially an A chord, but I like to keep the beat. Of course jigs has a different rhythm. Along the way I met this guy Ted Bogan who was a blues guy from the 20s. I hung out with him a little bit and I learned swing chords from Ted. [Larry strums swing chords.] So I like to put those in certain types of tunes, Cape Breton tunes, Shetland tunes, rags, not old times, not Irish, especially. Traditional New England often works. So I have that style, too. But you might have noticed I still have a bass and a chord. Here's a little bit less bass, but still has that idea. [Larry plays guitar.] And then like I alluded to earlier, I do the drony style and maybe for a jig it's more smooth. [Larry strums smoothly in jig time.] So now there's no bass, I might even [Larry strums in a higher register] so at least you can hear where the phrasing is [Larry strums in the higher register, emphasizing the beginning of each measure] or something like that. So I kind of let people know where the phrase starts or just beforehand.

**Julie Vallimont**

Leading up to the beginning of the phrase. How did your playing change once you started playing for contra dances?

**Larry Unger**

I became a little bit more experimental with my left hand. And like I said, I know lots of ways to play an A chord. When I was just playing for old time sessions I would just stay down here [Larry plays boom-chuck in standard position] might use one finger or three fingers but when you're playing for a long time at a dance, maybe your hand gets tired or you get tired of that same shape. And so you start [Larry plays boom-chuck with a higher chord inversion] and then I started, you know when I do scales, putting chords with each of those bass notes. So I learned for instance, in the key of A, you have open strings, and when you just have three strings you need to take care of so either A, D and E, I, IV and V, all up and down the neck. Playing for a dance you play for a long time. You have time to play different A chord, and then at a dance, we're always a little bit drama kings and queens, and we like to bring it down and then bring it up. Maybe people get excited and yell, so you do things to make that happen. I hear people do things, maybe piano players, and then I will work them up on the guitar. I usually don't work them up, I usually just think of them on the spot.

**Julie Vallimont**

What kinds of things, like chord subs or textures or riffs? Or what?

**Larry Unger**

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Okay, so the first thing was, if you're in A you can just...throughout the piece, you can just play an A chord [strums A chord] even though you're supposed to be changing or you can play the V chord, the E chord for too long [strums E chord] so like all this tension builds up and then the tune starts over again and everyone's happy. So I would never do that at an old time jam.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'm just laughing, their reaction would not be well received.

**Larry Unger**

No it would ruin the session. So you always, as a backup player, you always have to do what seems to be appropriate for the time and the genre you're playing and the gig you're at. So how did contra change my backup? It's just I found other ways to play that were expressive and that dynamic changes. Riffs? Well, I can do riffs, I usually make them up.I'm really good at making up riffs, I have to say. I do it all the time during the walkthrough, all the time, I have 1000 riffs, but then I don't like to play them during the dance. Go figure.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's interesting.

**Larry Unger**

So I mean [Larry strums a half-time groove]. But you know what, by the third time through, I would be sick of myself and people will love it. But I don't love playing it. Okay, it's just, I sort of make fun of it during a walkthrough...but then I don't want to do it. Once, you know just once I'm going to do that seriously at a dance, just do all these things that I'm sort of good at that I don't dare do.

**Julie Vallimont**

Some kind of groove or something a little bit more poppy sounding.

**Larry Unger**

Some of the fiddlers I worked with would be very happy if I started to do that. I know they would. But I don't know...it goes back to what drew me in the beginning, a certain sound and I just like that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's not your aesthetic, right? It's not what drew you to music.

**Larry Unger**

When I first started playing music what did I learn? Beatles songs and Bob Dylan songs, it was 1970. But am I gonna put that riff in behind fiddle tunes? No. I love that song. But I don't want to play that a contra dance. I don't know, just some people don't mix their genres in medleys, old time and French Canadian and so people don't want to mix their genres in the back up.

**Julie Vallimont**

Although our influences often come out even subconsciously in our playing. Do you think that like, you know, we all make the music that we were surrounded by in some way or another? Do you think that comes out in your tune writing at all in any way?

**Larry Unger**

Oh my tune writing just goes where it goes. So what I've ever heard in my life, eventually it gets in that tune. But I encouraged myself as a tune writer to be more accessible, more basic. Can I make something interesting that's not [Larry plays a quirky motif] that has seven different ideas in it, little chromatic riffs, chords that don't belong and they keep...Pick one, don't pick four of them.

**Julie Vallimont**

It doesn't have to be intellectually fancy or anything.

**Larry Unger**

I find that just by playing in rhythm...some of these things just want to come in because you can't do it. But I could sit down ahead of time and say, okay, I'm gonna write a song that has the chords where the dots are. I could do that. I mean maybe it would be fun, maybe not, but it wouldn't probably be my best tune. It's just an intellectual exercise, it may or may not work, musically.

**Julie Vallimont**

I've been thinking about the way you said about accessibility of tunes. A lot of people grew up listening to the Beatles and things like that and Dylan. I did too, even though I'm a little younger than you. I think the relatability to the music is an important thing for the dancers. I think about some of the chestnuts have been making a comeback, there's the whole Money Musk thing. Why not Chorus Jig? Why not any others, why just Money Musk? Now that's a separate question. But when I would play for dances in New Hampshire, in some parts of New Hampshire, they do Chorus Jig every single time. They all know the dance, and they all sing along to the tune [Julie sings Chorus Jig] and the whole hall comes alive. I think the advantage of relatable tunes is that they're kind of singable in some way, like Door County #2, I think is so popular because it's a song, it's a tune all together. The melody is very accessible, and has some really juicy chords in it that are really great to grab onto.

**Larry Unger**

So on the banjo, so the banjo, clawhammer style, you're not going to be playing a lot of eighth notes and chromatics, it's just hard to do smoothly. You can practice it and get it but so it's no surprise that that tune came out that way, writing it on the banjo.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think about things like halftime grooves and riffs and stuff like that. I wonder, different dancers relate to them in different ways. Some people are like, I grew up listening to pop music, I don't want to dance to music that sounds like pop music.

**Larry Unger**

Well what is pop music? It has changed. What they grew up to 10 years from now, they might not like to have pop tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Like the chordal structures of a Beatles song is very different than the chordal structures of pop music that's being made now, for example.

**Larry Unger**

Or the rhythm.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or the rhythm. I don't know where I'm going with this. I guess I'm just putting it out there and seeing if you have any thoughts about this. I guess, in trying to figure out what is tradition, I think a living tradition needs to stay relatable but not change so much that it doesn't recognize itself anymore, that you don't lose the good parts of it. I think a world of contra dancing without fiddle tunes wouldn't be a very happy world.

**Larry Unger**

It wouldn't be as good. Well, these dances go back hundreds of years, so it'd be a shame that once in a while some of the old dances didn't get called. So not every week, not all the time. But once in a while, if people didn't know Chorus Jig, it'd be a shame. And in the same way, I'll go back now 20 years, maybe longer. I was at a dance at the VFW Hall and who was playing? I'll say their names [Rodney Miller](https://www.rodneymiller.net/) and Peter Barnes, [Kate Barnes](https://www.cdss.org/contrapulse/podcast/episode-9-kate-barnes/). It was like you would expect, it was really good. They sounded good. Someone said to me, this music isn't very exciting, because at that time didgeridoo was really in and drums. And you know, it's just two people playing and it's not very exciting. I said you've got the melody and you got the backup. You've got a really good fiddler and a really good piano player. And I said at that time, and I mean it today, if we have to have more than that, we've lost something. So in other words, I think a band like that should always be able to get booked once in a while. If it was just all the big drama bands, we've lost something, going back to what you said.

**Julie Vallimont**

And those are two of the most interesting players that are out there who could take a tune and do a million things with it.

**Larry Unger**

That's right, but this critic, music critic, dancer, it wasn't enough for that person. Now, they could say that's not my favorite or whatever. But I think if we lost that tradition of solid melody and solid backup, we've lost something.

**Julie Vallimont**

I agree with you there. Dudley would say any tune works for any dance.

**Larry Unger**

I agree, it can.

**Julie Vallimont**

The beauty of New England tunes is that they don't have too many notes. They're kind of like in between, like an old time tune and an Irish tune. They have a little more notes, but not a lot more notes.

**Larry Unger**

Except for those flat key hornpipes...

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right. President Garfield's Hornpipe aside, but in general. I think you can kind of sing along with them a little bit. They have this accessibility to them. But they're not flashy right now. Do you play many New England tunes?

**Larry Unger**

I almost said, well, I know them all. I'm just a backup player. But I have played them. Depends on who I'm playing with. But I'm always impressed with, for instance, when I started playing with [Audrey [Knuth]](http://www.audreyknuth.com/), and she was kind of new on the scene, and the caller would say, can you play Chorus Jig or whatever and she'd be like, yeah, she could. [Lissa Schneckenburger](https://lissafiddle.com/) when she first came along and I was playing with her. To me, if a fiddler says, yeah, I can do that I say, yeah, that's good for you. You are a real fiddler, it's because you care about that.

**Julie Vallimont**

So maybe that's the fiddling equivalent of, should a rhythm player be able to play boom chuck, even if they don't often.

**Larry Unger**

Well yeah, because sometimes it's appropriate, even tastes aside, if it's his first dance of the evening, or if the caller is having trouble, if they can't get the dance. Or if you have a gig, if you're playing with what you call a general business gig or it's just a one off. They need really basic so you can hear the beat. You can't do your fancy stuff, save that for the concert hall.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, but a lot of bands can't do that these days, they have one mode. That's what I seem to observe.

**Larry Unger**

Or they don't care to.

**Julie Vallimont**

Or they don't care to or they don't learn. Have you been directly influenced by piano styles at all or just kind of subconsciously?

**Larry Unger**

Sure. I mean, if I hear a piano player playing the five chord to death, then okay, I learn it and then you can't help but imitate, so let's go back 25 years, whatever. There was like three tunes. The [Groovemongers](https://www.groovemongers.com/). Friends of mine. Love the Groovemongers. I just played with Rebecca [McCallum], but they were playing some song [strums a chord progression] that didn't have many melody notes, just this typical doo-wop chord progression, I, vi, IV, V for those in the know. I'm like, it's so popular and yet it's so contrived and I can't stand it but what...I wrote a tune that did that. Was that called? Sweet Briar. It kind of just goes through those four chords [strums chords for Sweet Briar] I couldn't help myself. I wrote one.

**Julie Vallimont**

Maybe the dancers relate to that, because it's so familiar. And it's interesting, you think of a band like Great Bear, who has had many musical accomplishments and people love this band. Every band is not to everyone's taste and they often don't play tunes and if they do, it's not for very long. And yet, I'll hear a hall full of people singing along with their hooks, or their pop songs. In not entirely the same way, but not a different way than when people would sing along with Chorus Jig in these halls in New Hampshire.

**Larry Unger**

The French Canadian, the la la song.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah! [Julie sings la la la..."Hommage à Edmond Pariseau" ]

**Larry Unger**

People love that just the same way they love to go [Larry claps twice in "petronella style"]

**Julie Vallimont**

Exactly! It's all the same. And so the tradition needs to change enough to keep being relatable to the people who are dancing, but without losing the character that makes it magical.

**Larry Unger**

Great Bear, they started playing traditionally. So they know something about it,

**Julie Vallimont**

The underpinning is underneath, they play tunes,

**Larry Unger**

You hope that they keep that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Kimberlee [Yerton], their mom, plays boom chuck piano more than most people. Andrew [VanNorstrand] especially loves the style of boom chuck piano, and they incorporate that into the sounds of their playing. So they're not throwing it away, it might look like what they were doing is pretty far removed from tradition. But it's the underpinning that kind of informs what they do and they could go back to it if they needed to.

**Larry Unger**

If they wanted to.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, if they wanted to. Want and needs are different things. So do you think it matters that people play all these old New England tunes, because I think some of them, they're not relatable in the same way today. But then they're also magical to dance to. I was at NEFFA, and watching all the different bands and there were amazing bands playing at NEFFA this year, and the one that got the most whooping was the Festival Orchestra, which is pretty funny. But a different kind of whooping, the modern bands get this whoop, where it's like dance, dance...let's build and then the whole hall's like "WOW!" which is what we love. But during the Festival Orchestra, people just whooping at random moments, I think because the music doesn't ask so much of you. It's this beautiful groove that you can just sail along on and the tunes just give you what you need, and they don't get in your way.

**Larry Unger**

They have a director, so they have some variations, makes it interesting. It's not everyone playing all out all the time. You know, I've traveled the country and there's a lot of open bands, and I give workshops, sometimes. What they most want help with is, well, we all play all the time and they're not so accomplished, because they only get together once a week or once a month so some are different abilities. So they're playing a little bit tentatively, all of them all the time. You just have to get a little bit inventive and have some arrangements, even if they're on the spot. It makes it more interesting is to play with more conviction.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, what kind of arrangement things do you think are most valuable? We've talked about, like hanging on the five chord and stuff like that.

**Larry Unger**

Dynamics is the first. That's the best. I think just playing strongly with a great rhythm is the most important thing. That's not an arrangement, that's just the way it is. Any band I'm in we don't plan anything we just play. But people trading four...I don't always like when bands go solo, solo, solo, over and over again, I like to break it up more than that, by trading fours or all of a sudden the melody players are playing with them. Of course, there's all these chordal tricks and scales. Scales are great. When I have a bass gig, I'm not just following the name of the letter the chord, if it's an A chord, E chord, D chord, A chord [Larry plays chords] I say, D chord has what note that's next to an A? [Larry walks down the scale] So it's like a little guess. I'm good at math so I like to follow...every chord has three notes. And the next chord has three notes. So you just pick one of the notes that's next to the previous one you just played either going up or down. And you can [Larry walks up and down the scale] get pretty far...

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you use those as basslines a lot when you play with them.?

**Larry Unger**

Yes. Especially when it's a song that will take swing chords but even in old time [Larry strums chords with moving bassline]

**Julie Vallimont**

When I was first learning to contra dance, I didn't know any tunes. I danced to the basslines. I felt like I would listen and it was often to Yankee Ingenuity, that's probably the band I danced to the most if it were one band. Cal [Howard] on the bass, and I would just hang on to those basslines and grab on for dear life, because it was just the right amount of phrasing I needed to tell me where I was.

**Larry Unger**

Cal always kept the beat. He wasn't the most inventive bass player, but he was really solid, he was a really good dance musician.

**Julie Vallimont**

He learned to watch the piano players, when I first played with him on piano, he would watch my hands and follow what I was doing.

**Larry Unger**

Yes, he was a good follower. Well, he was a musician who cared to follow. He liked to play with other people. I had a gig with [Jay [Ungar] and Molly [Mason]](https://jayandmolly.com/) years ago, bass gig and I'm playing along with them and Molly turned to Jay, she says, there's a bass player who's listening to us. I don't know who the bass player was before me or before him, but you should be aware of who you're playing with, and try to play along and be aware of the situation you're playing. Sometimes I'll turn to musicians if I feel like they're not paying attention and say, "look at all those people out there!"

**Julie Vallimont**

If they haven't been paying attention to the dancers?

**Larry Unger**

Yeah I just to try to be aware of what's going on around here.

**Julie Vallimont**

Choreography has changed so much, there's a bigger variety of dances. Callers are asking for more and more specific tunes. You know, like the adage, any tune works for any dance. There are some tunes and some dances now that are so specific, that they don't work great together anymore. It's almost like a new formula that we have.

**Larry Unger**

Are you saying that the tunes don't fit the dance anymore?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, there's some tunes that we can only play this tune with balances, like the phrasing is weird enough that it needs balances to hold it together. Or if a caller has some really smooth flowy dance in mind, and you play [Julie hums a dorky, not-smooth tune] you know, it's not gonna have that....

**Larry Unger**

You could sing that smooth. Come on, could you?

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, sure. And you could play it smooth, right? As a backup player, a lot of that is in your hands of what textures and tools you have. Have you noticed that changing a lot in the time you've been playing in terms of what callers are asking for and what you have to do musically?

**Larry Unger**

Well, going back in this interview, at the beginning callers were very specific and they were running the show. And now we're always just saying can we just see the card and try to do it...so, and more willing to do that. So I'm not sure where you're leading me in a way. I don't get the question you're asking me.

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know if I'm trying to lead you, if I am is by accident.

**Larry Unger**

Yeah, callers are...if things are going well they're usually happy for you to pick. I'm all for this team idea. So if they might say, well, okay, let's bring it down now, that's fine with me. Or say, like a jig for the third one. Okay, so we'll say we won't do a jig for the second one, you know, ahead of time. So I'm all for that teamwork thing, or if the old time...But if you just played a really romping old time tune and say, well, this next one...if she really want something specific, she tells you ahead of time. Not just at the time of the dance...

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you have any last thoughts or we could talk for hours, but I don't want to take endless amounts of time. We've covered a lot so far. Part of the question that we're looking at is just how is the tradition changing? There's a lot of different ways that we can all fit into it, and a lot of different ways of doing it.

**Larry Unger**

Well, like I said, when I started doing contra gigs people were saying that I have been changing. I think of myself as...I'm very traditional minded. But people were complaining about me because I'm playing the guitar, not the piano.

**Julie Vallimont**

And here we are, now everyone plays guitar.

**Larry Unger**

But then now, am I going to complain about the didgeridoo years ago or whatever the is the new didgeridoo? What right do I have to complain about that? So I just repeat myself, it'd be a shame if a fiddler and a rhythm player can't get gigs. Because there's all this other stuff. There's gotta be room for tradition, and whatever else there is. Now what is tradition is what you first heard, what got you interested.

**Julie Vallimont**

Tradition is where you started from, is that what you're saying?

**Larry Unger**

That's traditional to you.

**Julie Vallimont**

Now old time music is now traditional for contra dancing I would say in some ways.

**Larry Unger**

Well, when I started people had been dancing contras in Chicago for decades, not as long as Boston, but a long time. They were exclusively old time music from the beginning. And fast, if you didn't play fast you didn't get booked there. So what you just said, is that really true for some places like Chicago, they always had old time music. Asheville, when I started, like early 80s, Asheville, I think they started in the 70s. They had old time musicians. The Old Farmer's Ball...the one that was falling down. Yeah, then after a while, old time musicians couldn't get booked there. So what you just said is maybe true, maybe but in some places, it's always been there.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think bands now feel very free to take in tunes from a whole bunch of different places and just incorporate them.

**Larry Unger**

You can play an old time tune, but it might not be an old time tune the way you play it. I can name any genre and say that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It wouldn't sound like an old timey tune, you'd contra-ize it.

**Larry Unger**

To an old time musician it wouldn't be recognizable, hardly. So the in that way, when a caller asks for an old time tune from a band that's hammer dulcimer band they might get the tune but they might not get the feel that they want or they might not be sophisticated to know that okay they're getting that tune but it's not the way that it would be. I'm a little fussier about square dance. I want it to be one tune and not a medley, a driving tune if that's what's called for.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because in a square dance you're supporting, the caller is the variety and you're supporting the caller. Do you do dynamics in a square dance?

**Larry Unger**

Nope.

**Julie Vallimont**

Every time I play with people who try to do dynamics, you bring the volume down, and then the caller says one more and immediately goes out, as soon as you get bored, it's almost over.

**Larry Unger**

I could play a G chord with right fiddler, just a one chord tune and be happy.

**Julie Vallimont**

What do you think traditional will be in the future? Do you know? I don't know, if someone asked me that question in an interview, I'd be like, that is a weird question. I don't know how to answer that.

**Larry Unger**

Well, I guess, people for a long time, people worried well, old time music, all the old fiddlers are going to die and there won't be any more old time music, but people just come along. So it's the same way. I don't worry about what the future of this dance or music is going to be, it'll probably be there to some extent. I don't spend much time worrying about what the new tradition is. I just know that there's some things happening that I don't especially care for and that's okay. I don't have to go to that dance. It'd be a shame if every band I didn't like.

**Julie Vallimont**

But you don't feel that way?

**Larry Unger**

No, there are a lot of bands I like.

**Julie Vallimont**

So you feel it seems like overall, it seems like the tradition's healthy, more or less,

**Larry Unger**

More or less. You know, you travel like I do so you see some communities for a long time. They were getting less and less people and they were all my age. When I started dancing, they weren't all my age. What happened, we got older and then what happened to the other people that were supposed to come in? So some communities are suffering from that. But it's been pretty good. I know dances go up and down. Some of the really good dances now have less people.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, here in Boston.

**Larry Unger**

Am I gonna worry about that? You just encourage people to go, you know, whatever. You try to do your job as far as playing good music, promoting the whole scene. I'm not an organizer like other people so they're more worried than me. I mean, of course I want to have my career. I like my gigs. My fancy car and fancy guitars and stuff.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, you do have multiple guitars.

**Larry Unger**

There are some nice ones.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, a lot of stories. That's a whole other topic of conversation.

**Larry Unger**

Yeah, that's not this interview.

**Julie Vallimont**

Anything else you want to add?

**Larry Unger**

I guess as far as my music goes and what I like it all goes back to the blues that I first heard okay, and I love the sound. What does that have, it has a bass note and kind of a strum so that's what drew me to music in the very first place as a player, that style and when I picked up the guitar, the flat pick which I don't like as much, I like to finger pick more. I like that feel that I was just playing, not as much though. So that informs my style, my way of playing right there and anything else I don't like as much.

**Julie Vallimont**

That works really well for dances, it's built in boom chuck.

**Larry Unger**

You're not going to do that for Bossa Nova. I love Bossa Nova, but not as much. For instance...the Tango or whatever.

**Julie Vallimont**

So that's your happy place and it works really well for dances.

**Larry Unger**

The banjo has the same kind of feel I guess so that sums it up.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, thank you so much for your time today.

**Larry Unger**

Sure thing, good luck interviewing all these people. Take out all the stuff I said.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh yeah I'll edit it all out [laughter].

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