

Contra Pulse Episode 34 – Amy Larkin

Julie Vallimont

This episode, Julie sits down with fiddler Amy Larkin of Falmouth, MA. With several generations of musicians in her family Amy knew she would have no choice but to follow suit; thankfully she took to the fiddle and has become a quintessential part of the New England contra dance scene playing in too many bands and musical groups to count: Uncle Gizmo, Heyday, LocoMojo, Mr. Spanky, to name a few, along with lots of informal collaborations. and of course she's also part of a long-time Cajun Zydeco band with her husband, Jonathan Larkin.

Julie Vallimont

In the interview Amy describes her formative experiences growing up in Lincoln, MA and dancing to callers such as Ted Sannella and Dudley Laufman. We revisit her days touring with Larry Unger and other bands, talk about her current musical projects, and delve into her thoughts on working with callers and playing for dances. She also shares stories about the Boston-area dances, which have played such a huge role in her life as a musician.

Julie Vallimont

A quick note: in the interview Amy and I had a brain lapse and mistakenly referred to CW Abbot as "CJ." Sorry CW!!

Julie Vallimont

Hello, Amy Larkin, and welcome to Contra Pulse. I am so happy to have you here.

Amy Larkin

Well, it's lovely to be with you.

Julie Vallimont

Where are you today?

Amy Larkin

I'm in my home in Falmouth, Massachusetts.

Julie Vallimont

How long have you lived there, quite a while now, right?

Amy Larkin

Well, my husband and I built this house. So like 23 years we've lived here.

Julie Vallimont

Because I remember meeting you. I was living in Boston because I lived in Boston for 20 years or so and that's how I met you is in the contra dance scene out there.

Amy Larkin

I thought I met you in Amherst at Linda Henry's dance [the South Amherst dance at the Munson Library]?

Julie Vallimont

Yes, that is where we met for the first time. Absolutely. You were playing with Linda. You had your band Locomojo back then.

Amy Larkin

Oh, that band.

Julie Vallimont

That was a fun band. You and Shirley [White].

Amy Larkin

Yeah, it was fun.

Julie Vallimont

I remember I'd been spending a little time with Linda because I was enamored with Linda's piano playing style.

Amy Larkin

She's amazing.

Julie Vallimont

She's amazing and she was being a helpful piano friend. I think she had invited me to, was it the South Amherst dance, the one in the library, and you were playing there and that was really fun.

Amy Larkin

Did you sit in with us? You did one tune or something.

Julie Vallimont

Now I'm just remembering that, I did. I was so new. I didn't know most of the tunes. You were all so patient with me. I remember you played Fiddler's Dream and I was like this tune is amazing. But it has these really amazing chord changes. I didn't know them in the beginning and so people were like [yelling chords] five! Five! But that's what you do. That's right. Oh, that was a fun night. I just remember being struck by your energy and just the energy of all of you together and how much fun and wild and crazy you were all being, so great.

Amy Larkin

Well, that's something I really love about playing contra dances, because nobody's looking...I'll say it in quotes, "the audience..." the dancers, they're not looking at you. They don't care what you do, as long as you keep the rhythm and it's fun and lively. So you get to make stuff up. I just love that. I'm still doing that, playing in pub bands making stuff up, but it's sometimes it crashes and it matters less than

the contra dance, at least to me. It's like, Oh, well, I tried that. It didn't work, okay, the people are still dancing. They're still having fun. I'm not like the whole thing that people are paying attention to. There's so much else to pay attention to.

Julie Vallimont

You're part of the entertainment but not all of it. So as long as the music keeps going you can take risks and and do things.

Amy Larkin

Yeah, yeah.

Julie Vallimont

So how did you get started playing the fiddle and how did you get into playing for contra dances?

Amy Larkin

I was nine years old and my mom asked me so what instrument do you want to play? There was never a question was I going to play an instrument it was which one, both her parents were professional musicians. Her mother was Nora...she sang with John Philip Sousa and her father, played piano and organ and he was a music teacher at Taft School in Watertown, Connecticut. But so, what instrument, so I just said, the violin. I don't know why, but that's the one I picked. I was nine, I started taking classical lessons and then I played in the school orchestras. I never wanted to practice. My mom made me practice a half an hour a day. It was never, "If you don't practice, I won't buy you lessons." That was not a threat she was willing to make because I would say, okay, I'm not taking lessons. It was just like, this is what you have to do. To get through it, because I didn't really want to do the work I just played these long, slow notes. I had to practice for half an hour. So I just played long, slow notes. So it was no work. But then it turns out that that's actually a thing that teachers try to get you to do like to get good tone and even tone so it served me well. I was trying to be as lazy as I possibly could and it served me in the long run somehow.

Julie Vallimont

Like technique by accident. And how did you discover dancing?

Amy Larkin

I think I might have been three or something the first time, no, I had to be older than that. I grew up in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and Ted Sannella had these dances on Thanksgiving or was it the Fourth of July? He'd hold these dances in the Smith School gym. It was recorded music but, they were, I wonder if we'd call them square dances, but they were New England dances. I remember doing a Virginia Reel outside in the grass that near the center of Lincoln. So just north of the library, they're in there. I don't think that was [Ted Sannella](#), but I don't know. My mom was like, here go down that way. I was little, I was a tot. I've always loved dancing in contra dance. I did Scottish dancing, when I was 11 I started taking Scottish dancing lessons. They were a lot more formal and strict-ish. You had to memorize the whole dance and be able to do it. They didn't just keep calling. After Scottish dancing, I think I was in high school or so when I found contra dancing. It was so easy and fun, nothing to it.

Julie Vallimont

Where did you first go dancing? Was it one of the many Boston dances at the time?

Amy Larkin

I'm sorry, I can't remember. I was in this alternate semester from the Lincoln Sudbury High School and we went to a bunch of dances in New Hampshire. [Dudley Laufman](#) would call them but you know, there was those ones in New Hampshire and then there was Carlisle, Massachusetts, which was nearby and they probably had some dances at the Bemis Hall in Lincoln.

Julie Vallimont

There's a lot of local dances out just west of Boston, that a lot of people don't know about. Some of them aren't going still and some of them were but like you say, dances in Lincoln and Concord and Carlisle. The Concord one is obviously the most well known one, but there were dances in other places as well. Did you dance at the [Scout House](#)?

Amy Larkin

Oh, yeah.

Julie Vallimont

That being one of the legendary venues of contra dancing, such an amazing place.

Amy Larkin

Early on in my contra dance fiddling career, one of the things that was really fun is showing up to a dance and I'd have my calendar, and I'd be at the dance and sort of conducting business at the same time. Like, Oh, can you play here? Yeah, sure and who's bringing sound and getting the band together. That's another thing I love about it is the pickup bands. We all have this repertoire that we can play together, it's so easy. It's just such a joy to get together with other people, people you've never met, played with before. You just meet them and you can play music together and it's so much fun to be able to. Well, I couldn't do it playing jazz or classical, that's for sure.

Julie Vallimont

It's important that we have all these tunes in common so that you can just sit down, that's the magic, you can sit down with people you've never met before and play music together. There's really like nothing like it.

Amy Larkin

Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Like so many times at a place like [NEFFA](#) you have a jam session with people and you become friends and afterwards, you're like, what was your name? We just played together for three hours together, I don't know anything about you. It's so great. So you ended up being in the band, Uncle Gizmo, one of

your bands, how did that all come about? That was with [Larry Unger](#) and [Sam Bartlett](#) and Ginny Snowe?

Amy Larkin

Yes. I'm trying to remember. Okay, so Larry, was in a band with [Dave Langford](#) and Sarah Seward, I think. Larry was playing bass, Sarah was playing guitar and Dave was playing fiddle and they had a tour, and Dave couldn't make it and they asked me to come, I think, or maybe it was a little tour of Ithaca, New York, I don't really remember. Anyway, I filled in for Dave and then they asked me to do some more stuff. Sarah maybe moved to Quebec? This was a long time ago, Julie.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I don't remember what I did yesterday.

Amy Larkin

Anyway, so Larry and I started playing together and it was really, really, really fun. That man is a brilliant guitar player and we had this similar thing of just, we didn't try to make it too pretty. We would just hammer the people.

Julie Vallimont

It's dance music, right? It's not a concert. You want to have a little grit, make it move.

Amy Larkin

I'm kind of a scrappy player, though I am trying to smooth my tone out a little bit but it takes a lot of work.

Julie Vallimont

Your playing has this really fun sense of adventure to it that I really like.

Amy Larkin

Thank you.

Julie Vallimont

It's really great. It's like a little wild, in a really fun way.

Amy Larkin

Well, I want to try things. I don't want to just play the same, I just want to, they call it playing because you get to play with it. Maybe.

Julie Vallimont

A lot of people never make that connection. So what are your memories of playing dances back then? What was it like? What was the scene like or what kind of tunes you would play?

Amy Larkin

Okay, well, so in New England, there were really good contra dance musicians like lying all over the ground, practically, it seemed like. We went on the road, just Larry and me. And everywhere we went, people were going nuts. I couldn't believe it. Part of it, we went down south. Are you from Asheville or...are you?

Julie Vallimont

I grew up in New York State, but I've lived in the Boston area for 20 years before being in Vermont now.

Amy Larkin

I guess I thought you were from the south because Linda Henry took you under her wing as it were.

Julie Vallimont

Is Linda from the south?

Amy Larkin

Oh, yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, I had no idea. I always thought of her as living in western Massachusetts which is where she was when I met her. That's so funny.

Amy Larkin

I thought she knew you from down there. But so we go in this up...and so basically, there was a lot of old time music being played for contra dance, which is great. But a steady diet of just old time. I don't know. What Larry and I did is we'd open with a New England set and people would go nuts. We'd play New England and Irish and Cape Breton and old time. Just mix it all up. Variety is, it's good so nobody knows what's coming next. Or just you know, it's not dull.

Julie Vallimont

And then you can have a lot of different moods for a dance and textures, energy. Besides, there's so many different great tune traditions, why should you choose?

Amy Larkin

Right. Larry and I both like to dance. So our aesthetic of what is called for for a certain dance, I had a knack for being able to pick tunes that fit well. Usually, not always, sometimes, I'd screw it up, but usually.

Julie Vallimont

What are the things you look for when you're matching a tune to your dance and picking just the right tune?

Amy Larkin

Well, where the balances are, is the obvious thing. You want to have the tune, give a thump where the balances are just to help the dancers out. You know if it's a sort of a lyrical flowy dance, you pick the lyrical flowy tune? Simple.

Julie Vallimont

Do you have a tune list that you look at while you're on stage to help you choose?

Amy Larkin

Yes.

Julie Vallimont

How long have you had a tune list? And is it the same when you've had for 20 years? Or do you change it from time to time?

Amy Larkin

Well, I keep adding to it. It's on the computer and I can add it and print more stuff and then of course I forget things. They get an X on my tune list. Now I've sorted it.

Julie Vallimont

If it's something that's not in your fingers anymore or you don't play it or you forgot how it goes entirely or any of those things?

Amy Larkin

Yeah, mostly if I forgot how it goes. Anyway, it's about four pages, many columns. I have it divided by let's see Irish Cape Breton, Quebecois, old time, New England, and modern and then there's another page of jigs. At the time, I had waltzes on there but I don't anymore. I have them organized by key because when I'm making up a medley I think oh, I think I need an A minor tune here. So I can look anyway, it worked, works, worked. I hardly know how to whether to be in present or past because of this darn coronavirus.

Julie Vallimont

I know it's weird when we haven't played for dancing for a long time now. It is present tense but also past tense either is okay, you can go back and forth between them as you feel right.

Amy Larkin

I'm supposed to play for that Ralph Paige dance weekend I was supposed to play last January. Wait. No, the previous January? I don't know. I can't even remember. But then they said oh, we'll just do it next year. I don't know if that's gonna happen. I don't know, it'll be weird. I played a dance in Wellfleet last Wednesday. It was outdoors. John Alden was the caller and basically, the whole time I'm sitting there thinking these people are crazy.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, people really miss dancing. I mean, it's August now and this started in March 2020. So it's almost a year and a half now that we haven't had dancing and people are anxious to get back to it. Dances are

starting up here and there around New England and beyond and some camps are happening this summer. Some people have vaccination requirements, some people don't, some dances are outside, there's different levels of mitigation. There's been some dances in the south. I didn't start the podcast with this in mind. But it really is interesting to kind of collect some of these stories and think about contra dancing at a time when a lot of us aren't thinking about it as much because we can't do it. It's been really neat to talk to people during this pause. It's funny, the memories come right back at first, just like what are we talking about? But then you start talking about it, like, oh, I remember this. I can just remember like the sounds in the hall and the sounds of the dancers' feet on the floor and the smells, the humid smells and everything. But there's just nothing like you go up to a dance hall and you hear the fiddles coming out the door, as you walk up, and there's just nothing like that feeling. The kind of music that you play, like the kind of tunes you choose and the way you play gives me that feeling of like this is just a good old New England kind of dance where people are just in here having a good time. It's nice to remember who we were and are, all at the same time, right? What was it like playing the fiddle? Did you remember all your tunes? Did you have to brush up before you started?

Amy Larkin

Well, yes, I was playing with another fiddle player so we went over our list before we started.

Julie Vallimont

So what are your some of your favorite tunes on your tune list to play for dancing?

Amy Larkin

I have to say my favorite tunes now are like, slow airs that I don't play for dances but let's see favorite tunes to play for dances. I'm really liking that Barbara McOwen tune "The Raivlin." Oh, that's one of my favorites. Have you heard it?

Julie Vallimont

No, I don't know that.

Amy Larkin

Okay, well, I'll play it. It's slow. I'm gonna play it slow because, it can be dance tempo. I can play the faster but I have to tighten the bow [Amy plays "The Raivlin"]

Julie Vallimont

That's a beautiful tune.

Amy Larkin

Isn't that awesome?

Julie Vallimont

I love it. The B part has some really cool moments in it.

Amy Larkin

I learned that from Rose Clancy. I've been getting to play with her...an Irish fiddler up here. Really amazing.

Julie Vallimont

Lovely. Where have you learned tunes from over the years? I imagine from bandmates and in sessions and jams and wherever but where do you like to get new tunes from?

Amy Larkin

Well, lately, it's been Rose Clancy. You know, just who I'm playing with. I've been teaching Cajun music at this [Rhythm and Roots Festival](#) with [Pam Weeks](#). She hired me to help them and she's showed me some tunes. Oh, Hollow Poplar, I learned that from her but I don't remember it right now. It's in G and it has some nice IVs in it.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, yeah. Love a good IV chord. So you also play Cajun Zydeco music with your husband, Jonathan [Larkin].

Amy Larkin

Well, we used to.

Julie Vallimont

Well, everything is past tense right now.

Amy Larkin

We still have a house full of accordions.

Julie Vallimont

Someday they'll get dusted off.

Amy Larkin

He plays them but not out, no place to.

Julie Vallimont

What is your band called with Roberta Sutter?

Amy Larkin

Mr. Spanky.

Julie Vallimont

Spank me? What is it?

Amy Larkin

We started out being Spank Me. We were banned in Cambridge, so for Cambridge, we became Mr. Spanky. Right after that somebody started calling "He who will not be named" Mr. Spanky. So that was annoying. But anyway, yeah, Spank Me. We thought of Running with Scissors.

Julie Vallimont

Oh man. That's another band. I remember hearing you at the Scout House a couple times. You on fiddle, and Roberta on piano and then often you had one or two more people with you.

Amy Larkin

Right.

Julie Vallimont

All so fun. How are these bands all different from each other for you? Or is it just like different people, then you play tunes and you make up medleys on the fly?

Amy Larkin

Well, music, it's a communication and the person brings what they have and so every band is different. Where did we play with Catherine Miller and Jack?

Julie Vallimont

I think it was the Chelmsford dance. That was fun, Jack O'Connor, Catherine Miller. It's like that kind of thing, where you just have four people together, we had never rehearsed and the four of us have very different musical styles and personalities and I love that. The Chelmsford dance is like that, also in Massachusetts for our listeners, another kind of area of Greater Boston. But then the [Monday contra dance](#), the dance at the Scout House that used to be the Yankee Ingenuity dance. When the Yankee Ingenuity dance ended, they transitioned into at first it was Jack O'Connor and Cal Howard kind of anchoring it with a couple folks organizing along with them. Eventually, it just became different musicians who would come and play and so Jack would book you for a dance and you don't know who you're going to play with. You can look at the schedule, but it doesn't matter if you know them or not, is the fun thing. And it's like, okay, what do the four of us have in common? Where do we overlap and where do we not and you're kind of literally feeling each other out on stage and it's such a fun feeling. I remember Jack would always be excited about tunes, like, let's play Wing Commander Donald MacKenzie's and everybody would try to pull out sheet music or something because nobody knew it. So there were times somebody else was leading a tune and people are listening and following along. I remember that night in Chelmsford feeling kind of like that, but we got a good groove on once we settled in. The dancers don't necessarily think about like the first couple dances of the night they're warming up their bodies and stuff. But sometimes the musicians are still warming up too. You've played with Heyday as well...

Amy Larkin

Right, that's me and Jonathan [Larkin] and Shirley [White] and George [White], that was fun band too.

Julie Vallimont

I've seen you play in Rehoboth with [Benjamin Foss](#), a duo.

Amy Larkin

Linda Leslie had this gig at the Taunton community TV station. They they were going to interview her about contra dancing and so she said, we're going to have a contra dance. I don't know how, she worked it out with them, but she got me to come and play. She said, Oh, there's this guitar player in Rehoboth you might enjoy playing with him. I said, sure., it's community TV, let's do it. So he showed up, I think he was 13, maybe he was 15. I don't know how old he was, he was young. Yeah. He'll remember how old he was but he was still in school. He was young and we started playing for this dance and I'm like, wow, this guy's really good, this is fun. I was booking the East Sandwich, on the cape, contra dance at the time, and I didn't have somebody for that Saturday. I'm like, so what are you doing Saturday? And he's like, I have to ask my dad if I can get a ride. His dad was there and he said, Oh, yeah, I'll take you. His parents have been so supportive of him playing music, his dad used to drive them and they must have been very relieved when he finally got his license. Anyway, Benjamin's an absolute joy to play with, just so good. He plays the fiddle too, he plays a mean fiddle.

Julie Vallimont

He plays everything.

Amy Larkin

I know, anything, builds his own instruments.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, he's a luthier and he loves collecting tunes. He loves collecting old New England tunes and things people don't play a lot anymore, learning new things and that's really fun.

Amy Larkin

I'm a huge fan, Benjamin, if you're listening, I'm a huge fan, which you already know.

Julie Vallimont

You've played together as a duo for many years now, like ever since basically.

Amy Larkin

He moved to Maine, so I don't get to play with him as much but it's very fun. Right before, the January before the big shutdown we did a little tour-let in Maine. We played Portland and then we must have played Friday in North Whitefield. Maybe just those two. Anyway, that's enough for a tour-let. But he got excited about old New England tunes. He wanted me to play President Garfield's Hornpipe. So I'm like okay, and try to come up with tunes that sounded good. I mean basically I think he capoed for it because is it in F or B flat?

Julie Vallimont

It's in B flat.

Amy Larkin

Okay. So it's in B flat. So we played an F tune and a B flat tune. The whole time, you know, I like everyone to get to shine and do what they do well, and he sounds so great on it. And it's like, well, I'll try to play it. And it didn't suck too badly. Anyway, it was just really fun. I think what I really like is to play on the edge of risk, like not sure whether I'm just going to completely fall apart, or whether it's going to come across. There's something about that that's exhilarating.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah.

Amy Larkin

How do you grow if you don't try to do what you don't already know you can do. Some people would do that at home when they're practicing.

Julie Vallimont

Practicing never feels the same to me though. I've had bands and we try to arrange things in rehearsals, but without the energy of the dancers it just doesn't feel the same. I get inspired differently when there's actually dancers there.

Amy Larkin

They really give something back. They are important, a really important part of it. Can you imagine trying to do a concert of contra dance music? Which reminds me, your Nor'easter album was so good, speaking of concerts of contra dance music.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, thanks.

Amy Larkin

That's as close as... [sound distortion] It's a really nice. The variety and timbre of everything. I really liked it.

Julie Vallimont

I think I sort of heard of your fiddling even before I met you through Max, Max Newman. Because he and I used to talk about contra dance and who's this and what's this? He had been living in Boston longer than me so he would look at the schedule and tell me now this fiddler is like this and this person is like this. I think he would sometimes sit in with you and Roberta. I remember going into those couple of dances just to like, listen and be a friend and dance and check it out. And so yeah, that's fun.

Amy Larkin

I don't know how long Max was here before I started getting to play with him. CJ [C.W. Abbott], whose last name I forget who was in Rhode Island who played with Rebecca McCallum and Jane...

Julie Vallimont

Jane Knoeck.

Amy Larkin

And somebody else [Teilhard Frost, then Mark "Pokey" Hellenberg]...C. W., he plays mandolin. Anyway, he's like, oh, there's this new mandolin player in town. I think you'd like him. I think we should do something with them at NEFFA So I said, okay. It was great.

Julie Vallimont

I remember Max and CJ [C.W. Abbott] ended up being pretty good friends, pals. They were tune pals, so it worked out. That was in the early days of the [Groovemongers](#). CJ [C.W. Abbott] lives like on an island now somewhere nice and tropical. At least as of a couple of years ago.

Amy Larkin

St. Croix, I think he's in St. Croix.

Julie Vallimont

Is it the Virgin Islands? I literally don't know. Also, this is all old news. Because none of us have seen each other for two years. So what do I know?

Amy Larkin

We haven't seen CJ [C.W. Abbott] for more like 15 or longer.

Julie Vallimont

I remember meeting him at a [Pinewoods Camp](#) where I think the Groovemongers or at least part of the Groovemongers were on staff but like you I don't remember. It's like all blurred now, it's just like this huge tapestry of memories of people and you don't always remember, "where did I meet you? Does it matter if I remember? You remember better than I did," you know. This blur of good times. Who were some of your favorite callers to work with? You've probably worked with a bunch of them.

Amy Larkin

Steve Zakon-Anderson. Tony Parkes, Dan Pearl, Sue Rosen and of course, Linda Leslie, Lisa Greenleaf. There's some hot shots out there now that I like do like Nils Fredland, Will Mentor. He's fun. He asks for different things. He had Max and me, he wanted to experiment for something that was he was going to do at the Flurry and he asked us to play really spare. He wanted to see how it would come out. It was really fun. It was more of a meditation. We didn't open the program with that but it was somewhere near the end, it was nice.

Julie Vallimont

Will is one of those callers who likes to experiment. You're on stage with Will Mentor you never quite know what's gonna happen and I love that feeling.

Amy Larkin

I always like to try to give the caller what they're looking for Chris Ricciotti is a lot of fun too. There's some really good callers, I'm sorry if I left anyone out. Did I leave anyone out? I'm sure I did. Did I say Dan Pearl?

Julie Vallimont

You did say Dan Pearl.

Amy Larkin

Oh, my god, the man's sense of humor, he's so funny. And not only that, a lot of times I'll launch into a tune and I don't remember how it goes and I'm just making something up. One time Kate Barnes said to me it's really hard to play back up when there's no melody. And I'm like, well, it's hard to play melody if I don't know what the chords are. I don't know. It's just a joke. But a damn. Actually Tony can do this too Tony Parkes, I'll launch into into a tune and I don't know how it goes, so he'll hum the tune to me. It's useful, callers who know music, that's useful.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, they can make suggestions. Would they ever suggest specific tunes? Or do they still leave that up to you?

Amy Larkin

Well, usually they'll say, this tune or something like it. Because they know better than to be too bossy. Depending, we won't. I actually don't mind being asked for specific tunes, but a caller can shoot themselves in the foot asking for a specific tune because it could be a tune that the band does not play well then they'll wish they hadn't done it.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, or you find that the band plays in a completely different style than the last band who played it and so while it's the same tune it doesn't have the same feel. When you're working with a caller, and they're talking about tunes or dances, how do you like to work with callers? Do they just kind of tell you what they want? Like happy reels, or do you like to look at the card?

Amy Larkin

Oh, I like to see the card or be told what the dance is.

Julie Vallimont

Like the name of the dance?

Amy Larkin

No, I mean, well, the name of the dance if it's one that I know.

Julie Vallimont

What do you are looking for?

Amy Larkin

From the caller?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, like when you look at the card, what are you looking for?

Amy Larkin

The shape of the dance, what happens in it. I mean, there's certain things that like for example, if it has a butterfly whirl that suggests old time to me. I don't know why, but it just does. Maybe a butterfly whirl is an old time move.

Amy Larkin

If it's got a...I can't think of it, it's in Chorus Jig.

Julie Vallimont

Contra corners?

Amy Larkin

Thank you, contra corners that ends in a balance and swing. I'm going to look for something that has a bump on the B2 for that balance, just to encourage people to get there on time. I remember Roberta and I were playing at a dance camp, it was the Lavender Camp [[Lavender Folk and Country Dancers Camp](#)] and these women were kind of new to contra dance. They came up near the end and they were like, thank you so much, because we have a hard time telling where we're supposed to be and at what time and your music just got us there. That was very, that was very gratifying.

Julie Vallimont

That's high praise. That's what you're trying to do.

Amy Larkin

Yeah, exactly. I just want to make it obvious to the people, you know, if this phrase ends, so do something else now.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, exactly. And you kind of build into the phrase, it's not enough just to play for a balance but you will fiddle into the balance so that they feel it, it's like inevitable, right?

Amy Larkin

That's the plan.

Julie Vallimont

I just remember watching you and Linda and Shirley play together and seemed like you're just all having so much fun. But you're all kind of making up as you go, playing off each other.

Amy Larkin

But that's the best, that is the best part. It's like, somebody makes something up and you hear it, you're like, oh, nice idea. You know, when especially you hear the idea, if the communication is really good you kind of tune into each other. You all hear the idea at the same time. Then it's the magic when you just all do the thing. I don't know what the thing is, but y'all do it. It's really great.

Julie Vallimont

What are some of your favorite tricks or crazy things you've done in that band? Or in any band?

Amy Larkin

Well, remember [Nat Hewitt](#)? He moved to Lincoln when I was 13, or something so I've known him for a long time. We've been friends for a long time. Sometimes we'd both be playing fiddle and we both do some crazy thing of sliding way up the neck and make weird noises. I mean, it's just fun. We would just make stuff up or do anything. Hey, what about this? Usually a little more musical than that.

Julie Vallimont

It's like as a rhythm player I never get to do that too much because somebody has to hold down the fort while you crazy kids are making strange sounds.

Amy Larkin

Right. Well, I'm not saying out of rhythm, they have to be within the rhythm. That's another thing I love about these tunes is the form and actually, it's true about contra dancing too. There's this form, and within the framework you can improvise within this framework and so the framework makes it safe. You do the thing, and then you come back to the straight form as it were. I'm not making any sense.

Julie Vallimont

I think it makes perfect sense. It is literally a framework, it's like a scaffolding, so that things don't totally fall apart. If you're just free improvising, that wouldn't work for dancers, necessarily, because you wouldn't know how to get it back but having that structure there gives you a safe place to improvise within, like you're saying. You can always go back to the tune if you need to, there's the form, there's only A's and B's to keep track of unless you're playing a three or four part tune.

Amy Larkin

It's very New England, when I think about the norms of the dance, like you have a partner, it's for the duration of the one dance, and then you can say sayonara and find somebody else. You can flirt as much as you want while you're in the dance hall and then leave.

Julie Vallimont

So you don't have to commit too much to any one dance, it's the sort of like 10 minute experiences and then you're on to the next. When you're making medleys what are some of your favorite key combinations or tune combinations?

Amy Larkin

Okay, well at the risk of having become formulaic I like major, minor, major and I like to always go up, like G, A minor, A major.

Julie Vallimont

So you would go up in letters of the scale, just for our listeners to understand. So, you know, you could go from like D to G and then to A, something like that.

Amy Larkin

I'd maybe go G to D. Well, it depends on the tune, it does depend on the tune, but let me think, let's see. [Amy plays tunes on the fiddle].

Julie Vallimont

Father Kelly's in G and then Star of Munster in A minor.

Amy Larkin

And then, Mason's Apron, A major.

Julie Vallimont

That's like a classic kind of medley and I love it and it works and it feels so good as a dancer, you can dig in a little bit during the minor part. And then everybody's like, whooooo when it goes major. I feel like there's bands that don't do medleys like that anymore and I love hearing them.

Amy Larkin

Awwww, well, sometimes, especially with Linda and Shirley in that band, sometimes we'd play one tune, then you can really develop it. That's fun.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, mess around with harmonies and textures and having the piano drop out and having it just be fiddle for a little while, classic New England contra tricks.

Amy Larkin

Or just do rhythm, there's just melody just rhythm. Then there's syncopation and there's leaving notes out. That's always a good trick.

Julie Vallimont

Were there any fiddlers that inspired you as a dance musician?

Amy Larkin

[Rodney Miller](#), [Ruthie Dornfeld](#). Who else played dances? Those are the ones that jump out.

Julie Vallimont

What was it about their playing that drew you to them?

Amy Larkin

Okay. So Rodney Miller, his playing is so rhythmic. He taps on his bow when he's playing to add to the rhythm. That's pretty cool. And Ruthie Dornfeld, I don't know she's just fierce.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, she has really amazing energy when she plays.

Amy Larkin

Yeah, she doesn't waste a lot of it, it all comes out in the sound.

Julie Vallimont

She has really beautiful tone. She's someone who used to be in New England and now is I think on the west coast.

Amy Larkin

I took lessons from her when she lived in Cambridge for a couple years, maybe. I don't know, how long.

Julie Vallimont

Do you remember what kind of things you worked on together?

Amy Larkin

Well, she taught me some tunes, quite a few tunes. Mostly I'd show up and she'd say, "Well, what do you want to learn?" and I'd have a tune ready and if I didn't have one she'd have one. I had lessons once a week and then I'd go home and learn the tune. She was always amazed that I did not record the lesson because I wanted to train my ears to remember, I wanted to learn it enough that I could. So I'd learn the tune and then I'd go home and practice it enough so I could remember it the next day to practice. She was a great teacher.

Julie Vallimont

That takes a lot of discipline, it seems like crazy in a way, to go to a lesson and learn a tune in a lesson and then not record it. But it really forces you to commit it to memory and get it in your fingers while you're there because you know, you won't have anything to refer to later.

Amy Larkin

Right. If I was going to take lessons now I would record it but my brain isn't what it once was either.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, just to like, have it for reference. But using recordings can be a crutch. There's times when I've recorded the tune in a jam session or some other session and I'm like, I love this and then I'll go back to it later. But it keeps you from learning it in the moment sometimes if you know you can learn it later and then do we ever go back to all those recordings? I don't know, I have years and years and years worth of recordings, like many of us do from all over the place. Even if I do go through them, then I'm like, Oh, this was this date, who was I playing with? Who are these people on this recording? Then I go back, and I cross reference it with my calendar and try to figure out where I was on that day and who it might have been. I was like, there's got to be a better way to do this. So I started labeling my recordings better and asking people immediately, what was that tune and where did you learn it from and making a note of it. I feel like, every time you're at a session you see people whipping out their phones or

recorders back before we all had smartphones that recorded and people must have some fascinating recordings that I would love to hear, like, go back and hear everybody's phone recordings or recorder recordings from 20 years ago. Not phones, obviously. But like cassette or whatever people were using at the time. It would be so cool to be like a fly on the wall at a place you couldn't be at.

Amy Larkin

You know what interests me, how tunes are really popular for a while and they get overplayed and then you don't hear them for a while and then you start to hear them again. Like Fair Jenny's Jig, just everyone was playing it until some people got sick of it. I'm sorry, Kate, but I never got sick of it. I think it's a great tune but anyway, I don't know if it's making a comeback or not or if it's only in my own head, but there's some really good old tunes. So there were these like old tunes and then we got too cool to play them or something. Like the Mason's Apron, its a great tune, Devil's Dream...I don't know, as I get older, maybe...well, I don't know. I don't like tunes that are too fancy, well, it depends.

Julie Vallimont

I think there are tunes either new, modern, at the time, like Fair Jenny's Jig was a new tune, and Kate Barnes wrote it, and then it became super popular. I remember when Flying Home to Shelley was in the moment. but then there's other tunes like Reconciliation, they're just like the standards. Frank's Reel, a lot of these tunes and like you said they can get kind of overplayed or Tam Lin or Catharsis or like a lot of these minor tunes that were all the rage. I remember Larry Unger wrote a tune called All the Rage, which is also a funny concept.

Amy Larkin

Ruthie Dornfeld told him that tunes in E were all the rage so he wrote that.

Julie Vallimont

And then tunes in B were all the rage. And honestly, now I think the tunes in B flat are all the rage. I think now these old tunes are, perhaps thanks to folks like Benjamin Foss and yourself and some of us other traditionalists. I feel like New England tunes in B flat are the cool tunes right now. Also hot Scottish tunes like fancy modern hot Scottish tunes, everybody loves those. Sometimes a tune just needs a little rest. I'm actually wondering, if we had two years or whatever, without dancing, maybe some of these tunes that we love, but we wore them out a little bit. I think of other tunes like On the Danforth, you know that Keith Murphy tune. But everybody plays it and maybe these tunes can get a little breather and we can come back and look at them fresh again.

Amy Larkin

I think I might have gotten tired of Homage à Edmond Pariseau. But it was Linda Leslie's favorite tune so I don't think I get to be tired of it ever again and also I can't really play it right. Maybe that was why, that's always a problem, the tunes that everyone loves, that I can just never really get it to sound the way I want it to.

Julie Vallimont

It's not that easy a tune to play. It has a lot of notes. But it's one of those ones that the contra dancers love to sing along with the B part which makes it fun. I miss Linda. When I was learning to play for

dances, Linda was one of the callers who I ended up working with a lot because often you end up starting at these smaller community dances, and Linda liked to call them. I remember, what was that dance? Another one outside of Boston, it was so small that there were often only four or six couples.

Amy Larkin

Medway?

Julie Vallimont

The Medway dance. They were so friendly though. We would bring our own sound, which often for us meant we'd have a microphone hooked up to a guitar amp and it was a total hodgepodge. I remember once we duct taped a microphone to the back of a chair because we didn't have mic stands, you know, things like that. But the people had fun and you didn't need a fancy sound system for that room, it was really friendly. Yeah, the Medway dance. I remember, Linda would be there and her husband Bob [Golder], and one of them would be calling and they would just adapt to the moment and bring out triplets or whatever. They were always so warm and welcoming. I felt like whenever I was playing for Linda, we were playing the best music in the world even if it wasn't, she was so supportive and so joyful to be there, it's really nice.

Amy Larkin

She was a contra dance ambassador. Oh, man, what a woman. You know how she started calling?

Julie Vallimont

No.

Amy Larkin

Okay, so I think that her first calling gig, it was in Rochester, New York, and she had broken her foot. So there's this dance and [Kerry Elkin](#) says to her, well you're laid up, you call the dance or something? That was fun. We're all like, yeah, you can do this.

Julie Vallimont

Did you play with Kerry back in the day?

Amy Larkin

He was sort of out of my league. I mean, the man was brilliant. I played with Ruth Richards quite a bit, his ex wife.

Julie Vallimont

I'm not familiar with her.

Amy Larkin

Oh, pianist. She's good.

Julie Vallimont

I guess Kerry was especially interested in Irish tunes and a certain style of playing them. How have you seen dances change? You've been doing this for decades now.

Amy Larkin

Okay, so when I was a child Ted Sannella would come to Lincoln and do these dances and it was canned music. Then they started having bands and the caller got paid and the bands did not and then the band started getting paid. That was a good thing. But the caller would get half and the band would split the other half and now it's a little little more even.

Julie Vallimont

Most people now, it's equal shares where if there's a caller and a three piece band, you split the money four ways. But not everywhere, some places the caler gets half, the band gets half, still.

Amy Larkin

Really? That's way too old fashioned for me.

Julie Vallimont

We musicians certainly all feel that way.

Amy Larkin

Yeah. I love that live music, how it's changed and also it's gotten more interesting. I'm just thinking, what was Bob McQuillen's band? Old New England with April Limber and I'm afraid I don't remember his name, Peter...Pete [Colby]. It's such a perfect name for a band too but they would just crank out these meat and potatoes tunes. There's nothing fancy about it. They just played the tunes and it was good enough. Damn it. But then, I don't know, I think it got more interesting, the music.

Julie Vallimont

Just more variety of tunes and played with a different kind of groove to them or feeling or what are the main changes?

Amy Larkin

I'm wondering if April would think it was an improvement but you know, I don't think so. She's a fine fiddler but just to improvise some things, play chords instead, I don't know. I guess I'm talking about improvising, using the tune as a jumping off place rather than just playing it straight.

Julie Vallimont

That's a good way to describe it like it either is about the tune, or there is the tune with the tune being a jumping off place to whatever other adventure will happen.

Amy Larkin

I cook that way too. Oh, I don't have this ingredient, I'll use something else or I'll leave it out, or I don't like this one, I'll put something else or you know, we get to make it up.

Julie Vallimont

And then sometimes it tastes good but it's usually nourishing.

Amy Larkin

When you start out with good ingredients it's hard to go wrong.

Julie Vallimont

Did you ever play with Bob?

Amy Larkin

Oh, yeah. I got to play Peterborough with him a bunch, it was fun.

Julie Vallimont

Just the two of you or were there other folks?

Amy Larkin

It was best when it was just the two of us, sometimes there were other people. But it was just easier because we could concentrate on each other. He got a little more opened up according to Steve Zakon-Anderson when we were playing together. I guess my being willing to try things gives permission for other people to just try things. I'm glad if that's true, because why the heck not?

Julie Vallimont

I wish there were recordings of that, are there any?

Amy Larkin

I don't know.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, who knows? Who are some other piano players that you've played with over the years? Did you ever play with Gordon Peery?

Amy Larkin

Yes. Oh, what a blast. Oh, he was fun. Really full sound and really rhythmic and he would always surprise me. And what, oh, can I remember her name? Becky Ashenden?

Julie Vallimont

Oh, yeah, also big sound. Becky, more of that Cape Breton sound, all over the piano, using every note. Gordon I just think of as like a one man piano party.

Amy Larkin

Becky was really lively. Debby Knight. Oh, she's fun to play with too.

Julie Vallimont

Debby is a great musician. She has so many ideas and from leading Roaring Jelly for so many years. She knows all the tricks. She plays fiddle as well as piano so she understands the tunes really well. I love listening to accompanists who also play melody because they know what they're accompanying. Like, they mean these chords, whether I like them or not is different, but they mean it because they know what the tune is. Debby was one of the people who when I was first starting to play piano in Boston, I would just go and listen to her at the Scout House playing that piano, that legendary piano that's had how many dances played on it now?

Amy Larkin

This is one of the really fun things about Jack booking the music at the Concord Scout House. The recent iteration of the Monday night dance is that he would put me together with people I hadn't met or hadn't played with before. Oh my god, it was so much fun. What was that guy? Scotty Leach?

Julie Vallimont

Oh, Scotty.

Amy Larkin

Oh, brilliant and I get to play dance with Alex...who's last name I don't...

Julie Vallimont

[Alex Cumming?](#)

Amy Larkin

Yeah! I get to play with with him out in Amherst. That was really fun. Some of these young hot shots are really a blast. [Phone rings]

Julie Vallimont

It's your ringtone a fiddle tune?

Amy Larkin

Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Nice. Y'all got to hear Amy Larkin's ringtone everybody. Nice jig.

Amy Larkin

Is that called Lad o' Beirne [it isn't...]

Julie Vallimont

They're all blurring together in my mind now. Like you talk about two years of not tunes, I'm like, what is that one? I know that one. Yeah, Scotty, I first met him when he was on the west coast. He is just a force both on the fiddle and on the piano.

Amy Larkin

Oh, does he play the fiddle too?

Julie Vallimont

He does. People don't know it but he's a great fiddler and then also has this really fun, really Cape Breton kind of syncopated piano style. Alex Cumming moved here from England and is now based in the Boston area and that's a great boon to us.

Amy Larkin

And then there's [Eric Eid-Reiner](#).

Julie Vallimont

Oh, Eric Eid-Reiner.

Amy Larkin

Oh, he's really good to play with and Kate Barnes of course, the master.

Julie Vallimont

I can't imagine what it's like, I never got to play with Kate because I play piano and Kate plays piano. She plays lots of things but for contra dance it's often piano. What's it like to play with someone who just has so many ideas coming out of them all the time?

Amy Larkin

It's exciting.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, in retrospect, there was a time when the greater Boston area had a lot of piano players, which I feel like isn't the norm. I'm wondering what your thoughts are about this. I feel like guitar is kind of taking over as the main contra dance instrument in a lot of places around the country, maybe that's not true. Maybe it's just me being biased as a piano player.

Amy Larkin

Okay, and [Jacqueline Schwab](#). I've played dances with her and that's really fun. Oh, man, she gets more out of a piano than anyone I know, it's just amazing.

Julie Vallimont

A lot of people know her as an English country dance player, of course, but they don't realize that she also plays contra dances.

Amy Larkin

Right, and Beth Murray, I have played with her, it was really fun. She's really good.

Julie Vallimont

I think Beth also plays for Scottish dancing.

Amy Larkin

I wouldn't be able to answer but the better question is, who haven't you played with?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. Or who won't you play with?

Amy Larkin

Oh, no, don't ask that one.

Julie Vallimont

That's off the record. Have you noticed changes in the dance scene, or the kind of tunes that are popular or what callers are asking for? Do you feel like callers ask for the same things that they used to when you were starting out?

Amy Larkin

I don't know about that. But there's sort of a difference between rural and urban type dance.

Julie Vallimont

Do you find that like, partly the kind of mood the dancers expect and the energy is different and also the kind of dances that the callers are choosing? There's also probably different, maybe simpler dances at a community dance where it's once a month and you don't have people who are like semi professional contra dancers.

Amy Larkin

The vibe is very different. As a musician, I have to play differently too, like, be a little more straight ahead meat and potatoes. I can't do fancy tricks as it were, cheap tricks, none of those.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, keep it so that the dancers can follow the phrasing and follow along.

Amy Larkin

I try to pick tunes that they recognize because it gives them something to hang on to. If it all sounds like deedly deedly deely dee to them forget it, but you play Turkey in the Straw or the Irish Washerwoman, they're like, oh, yeah, I know this.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, there's really intuitive melodies that you can almost sing along to. What are some of your other tunes that you like to use for beginners like that?

Amy Larkin

The Stool of Repentance? If they don't recognize it, but it's very well phrased. Yeah, go for very well phrased. Arkansas Traveler, they recognize that. Devil's Dream, Sailor's Hornpipe. Those are the ones that float off the top of my head, but really well phrased is kind of the answer. They need a structure to hang their faltering steps on.

Julie Vallimont

Maybe that means there are a lot of really lovely Irish tunes, but some of the Irish tunes, the phrasing can be hard to hear, there's a lot of notes that go by...

Amy Larkin

They're more lyrical. Like what's that tune? Um...Rannie Maclellan, the phrases are long. So it's great for contra dance where people sort of know what they're doing. Where people would at an experienced dance where people kind of hear the 16 bars, you know, eight bar phrases, regardless of whether you're playing through them or through the eight bars. They enjoy that because it feels like oh, yeah. But for new people I wouldn't use that. Oh, I was gonna ask you, so as a backup musician do you ever resent just being told hey, G or, we're gonna play this tune. I mean, do you ever resent the fiddle players just picking the tune?

Julie Vallimont

No, it's kind of fun. I mean, it depends on the setting. If I'm in a pickup band, or if we're all just together in a lump and we never practiced I feel like my role is clear. I am at your leisure/mercy to do whatever you want. I've had people yell keys at me and then the caller's waiting and nobody even tells me what the tune is. So I just have to play four potatoes and hope that I recognize the tune within the first few beats. But it's kind of fun, it's kind of exciting. After a while, you screw enough things up that you stop being afraid of screwing things up. I'm like, if I don't know the tune, I'll just drone until something recognizable happens, you figure it out. I kind of love it. I love that moment, or like, you're playing and no one's planned out the medley in advance, and then all of a sudden, somebody's like, "A", and you're like, okay, great. I'm just gonna go to A, I don't know if it's A major, A minor, hopefully A major, you know? I love that. I like the role of being a rhythm musician because it really is serving the tune in the way that the musicians all together are serving the dancers. I'm serving the musicians, and we're all serving the dancers, and also serving the caller, it's fun. That is its own framework if you talk about the limitations. My yoga teacher used to say limitations are freedom. If you think about the form of the tune the limitations actually making it really free to improvise. I also like the limitations of being a backup accompanist. Because it's like, how can I improvise within that but still mostly do my job, I'm not going to pretend that I'm good at it most, or all, or any of the time. But how can you make it interesting for yourself and other people and play around with it while still providing that kind of bread and butter rhythm? If the rhythm is not there, and the phrasing is not there I'm not doing my job. So I love playing with folks like you, because you just yell a key at me and I don't know what's gonna happen next and you just hope we all get there together. Or that moment when you have a pickup band and you're trying to go from a jig to a reel, but you haven't practiced the transition. And so you're like, I'm just going to try to make this really obvious what I'm going to do. It's like putting on your turn signals when you're driving so other people know what lane you're going in. I just try to make everything I do really obvious so that hopefully we can all do it together.

Amy Larkin

Oh, so here's the thing about changing tunes. I dislike making a subtle change. I want the change to go, wham. I don't care. It's just a thing. You don't want to just like, well, okay, well, that could go wham. But you could make a change where everyone plays the first chord, and then it's a solo instrument. But mostly I want to make a change where you're going along, maybe back off a little bit at the end of the previous tune, and then everyone all together comes into the next tune. Because that's exciting.

Julie Vallimont

How do you call it? Do you ever yell "Break" or things like that?

Amy Larkin

Oh, yeah, drama. That's what I like.

Julie Vallimont

Drama. Well, if you're not gonna make a big deal about the transition, why bother changing tunes? Why not just stay on one tune otherwise?

Amy Larkin

Good point.

Julie Vallimont

You know, one tune's good enough for as many times as you want to play it. So the whole point of changing tunes is to add that interest and variety, right? Yeah, I can see that.

Amy Larkin

And to pick people up. I just want to raise them up. That's why you play the off beat.

Julie Vallimont

For the lift for the players, for the dancers. I love when they think they're dancing and then the music kind of gooses them and they find more energy they didn't even know they had. As a dancer that's a really fun feeling. It just feels like you're flying after a while. It's really great.

Amy Larkin

So it's okay to speed up, especially if you do it on purpose, but it's never okay to slow down unless the caller says slow down because people aren't making it where they should go. As a dancer, I don't like it when the band slows down.

Julie Vallimont

It takes the energy right out of the dance. Do you have a favorite tempo you like to play at? Do you think about tempo?

Amy Larkin

Well, you know what, my sort of natural tempo was about 105 and dance tempo was 120. So I'm pretty much always playing faster than I would like, if I'm just playing at home, how fast I would play the tune, like between 105 and 115. But modern dancers like 120 so that's what we try for.

Julie Vallimont

I was just talking with Sam Bartlett and he was saying his favorite tempo is 104. So you guys should jam together. You have the same tempo.

Amy Larkin

I love Sam Bartlett. Yeah, Sam, if you're listening, how the hell are you doing? I miss you.

Julie Vallimont

We should all record virtual hellos to each other and put them up somewhere. You don't realize until we can't all go to these things there's people we don't see unless we're at the dance, like faces that we've known for years.

Amy Larkin

Oh my god, he plays that banjo like a weapon.

Julie Vallimont

A tenor banjo in the hands of Sam Bartlett is a formidable thing. Were you in Boston at the same time together like in the Massachusetts area?

Amy Larkin

He blew in from somewhere, made a huge splash and blew out again.

Julie Vallimont

Do you have any stories from the Uncle Gizmo days with all you guys together?

Amy Larkin

Well, he used to like to drive himself places instead of being in the tour with the band like the same car because he'd always have other people he wanted to see. Also he was infamous for getting lost, not lost, but like, not finding... You know what though, he was so fun to play with. What a great guy. He's a great guy and fun to play with. I miss him.

Julie Vallimont

Well, he looks good. I saw him on Zoom. Looks like he's doing well.

Amy Larkin

He's a very energetic young man, perhaps not so young anymore.

Julie Vallimont

I know. it's weird. We're all getting older, it's very strange. Do you have any other thoughts about the future of contra dance music? Or what you've seen change? Or where do you think it might be headed? I mean, it could be that you just want to keep cranking out the tunes.

Amy Larkin

Where it's headed is the young hot shots are going to take over. First, there was your crew there with Max Newman and you and then there's Julie Metcalf and Audrey Knuth. Just these people coming out of Berkeley. I just have in my head, all these young hot shots from Berkeley. I mean, it's really fun to play with them and on the other hand they've already left me in the dust but they're very kind to keep being willing to play tunes with me.

Julie Vallimont

I don't think any of us see it that way.

Amy Larkin

Ok well, it could be a thing. I'm not going to keep up. I know I'm just not but it's still a lot of fun and I love the energy that the younger people are bringing to this. I just love it, it's so great...younger than me, I don't know how young we're talking. I'm playing a dance with Julie Metcalf and just like her saying, I'm just so happy and excited to be here. I just think, oh, I remember that! And like, well I'm thinking, "do I need to drink coffee to get myself home?"

Julie Vallimont

The enthusiasm of youth.

Amy Larkin

It's inspiring too, particularly after this hiatus. It is really great to be out playing again. Now I did play for that one dance but that was outdoors on a pier. It wasn't like a contra dance in a hall. I'm playing in pubs for dancers. That's pretty fun but it's not contra dancing.

Julie Vallimont

When I was a new musician, a new contra musician in the Boston area and I would get to sit in with folks like you I was awestruck. There are a lot of players now, especially who are going to music school and interested in playing fiddle tunes or playing for contra dances, and you can have amazing technique and beautiful tone and that's great. And then there's also this depth of knowledge of just having spent a long time playing for dancers and knowing all the tunes and the new people don't know what all the good tunes are. We can easily forget about really great tunes if we didn't know what they were. I would love to look at your tune list and see the kind of tunes that you've been playing forever. Maybe we could get after the interview's over, you could send it to me.

Amy Larkin

There was a time when Linda Leslie, what was it she wanted me to write? Oh yeah, like for NEFFA orchestra and stuff they're trying to think of what are these tunes that sort of everyone knows. But there's some of those that we all used to know that people don't know anymore. I mean, Eddie's Reel, who plays Eddie's Reel?

Julie Vallimont

I don't know Eddie's Reel. I wish I did.

Amy Larkin

Let me see if I don't know how it goes. I don't know if I could play it, it's been a long time. [Amy plays the fiddle tune "The Crooked Stovepipe"]. That might have been about 105 anyway

Julie Vallimont

That's Eddie's Reel?

Amy Larkin

It might be the Crooked Stovepipe [it is!], might not really be Eddie's Reel [it isn't!].

Julie Vallimont

I've heard that tune a lot.

Amy Larkin

That's, that's not it. I thought that was Eddie's Reel but maybe it isn't.

Julie Vallimont

We'll have to dig it up. But tunes like that, I don't want them to just get lost or forgotten. But it's so funny how a tune that we think is gonna be around forever and is ubiquitous and is overplayed, and it's everywhere. Then 10 years later, 15 years later, it could be the nobody's playing it and it just gets lost.

Amy Larkin

There was one year at NEFFA when everyone was playing a French Canadian tune in D. [Amy plays fiddle tune]. That's it. What is that?

Julie Vallimont

Is that Pays de Haut.

Amy Larkin

Pays de Haut, yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I haven't heard that tune in a while. Oh, I miss all these tunes. So yeah, it's like we got to keep them around. It's important that different generations of musicians play with each other. The new folks can take it in whatever direction they want to, and they will and they should, it's a living tradition.

Amy Larkin

You were on that committee with that Cambridge dance that was the multi-generational something, something.

Julie Vallimont

[BIDA, the Boston Intergenerational Dance Advocates](#). I was there when we were arguing about the name, just like what it should be. We're like, that's a mouthful, we'll call it BIDA.

Amy Larkin

That was a really neat thing to do.

Julie Vallimont

The BIDA dance is still going strong. I think we had you there as a mentoring thing and we were trying to have newer musicians get to play with folks like you, and pairing people together. It was really fun to have you there as a part of it.

Amy Larkin

Thank you. I think when I was there, I didn't quite understand the concept but oh well, nevermind.

Julie Vallimont

It's possible that we didn't either, because we were being very experimental and kind of figuring it out as we went along.

Amy Larkin

Oh, well, good. I'm always up for something like that.

Julie Vallimont

Exactly. We are trying things out. But partly, we started the BIDA dance, because I had just been feeling like, there wasn't a place in the Boston area at the time for those musicians to mingle with each other and get to play with each other on a regular basis. Because the Thursday dance, whether it was at the VFW or Springstep or the Scout House, they hired established musicians but there were no sit-ins. And so there wasn't anywhere for the new folks to get to play with the more established folks who knew all the things.

Amy Larkin

Right. We had everything all sewed up.

Julie Vallimont

It's not a bad thing, it made the quality of the music and dancing really good. I'm not questioning their decision. But you could go to the MIT dance and sit in there and that's where a lot of us learned and met each other. That's how Max [Newman] and Cedar [Stanistreet] and I met each other. But not all of the established old timers...you know what I mean...the regular folks, they wouldn't go there. They wouldn't go there so you don't get to meet everybody there. So we need some intentional way to bring people together and I would go out to like David Kaynor's dances in Greenfield and just be so impressed by the vibe on the stage where people were sitting on the stage and hanging out and sit ins are welcome. I wanted something like that.

Amy Larkin

Brilliant. That was a really good idea.

Julie Vallimont

The Thursday dance, now at least I mean, it's been a couple of years now obviously, but they started having open bands.

Amy Larkin

First Thursdays, it was a thing.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, realizing that that's a niche and starting to find ways to bring people together.

Amy Larkin

The Thursday dance is sort of an NEFFA orchestra thing where anyone can come but what BIDA was doing was putting together bands.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, like a smaller ensemble, or it would be like, "hey, fiddler, you just moved to Boston. And you played contra dances in your hometown, but you want to meet people here, who are your mentors who you've always wanted to play with?" And then if we can make that happen, we would. So we had somebody say, "I've always wanted to play with Randy Miller and I've never known how to ask him" and so we could say, let's set that up. Or somebody wanted to play with Larry Unger and so we set that up, and so that's really fun. You played in, [Charlie Pilzer's](#) conglomeration, "Not Enough Fiddles."

Amy Larkin

Oh, yes. I thought it was called "Too Many Fiddles?"

Julie Vallimont

You're right.

Amy Larkin

Maybe it's not enough.

Julie Vallimont

I thought it was not enough kind of as a joke.

Amy Larkin

I think Never Enough Fiddles, not enough. Maybe it's not enough. I don't remember.

Julie Vallimont

We'll add it to the podcast notes [the band name is "Not Enough Fiddles"]. But that was kind of like as many fiddlers as were around and it was often these great folks like Carol Bittenson would be there, Debby and sometimes you and Cedar, Cedar was around and all these great folks.

Amy Larkin

Well, actually, it was not an open thing. You had to be invited.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah and that brought all these fiddlers together.

Amy Larkin

Charlie has something going on in DC where he mentors young people. I think Rebecca Weiss came out of there. You'd have to ask her but I don't know who else. He brought up some young people from DC.

Julie Vallimont

I'll have to talk to him about that or talk to Rebecca sometime. She ended up spending a lot of time in New England and obviously, most recently, being with David Kaynor and helping to care for him and write tunes with him and be a musical ambassador for him. A lot of stories there I'm sure.

Amy Larkin

Hi, Rebecca.

Julie Vallimont

I think she's finally out doing a little bit of touring right now this summer getting to visit people who she hasn't taking advantage of a little momentary break with everything and the pandemic. It has been so fun to talk with you. Are there any other topics that you want to cover? If you were teaching new contra fiddlers today, what would you emphasize?

Amy Larkin

Memorize your tunes. I mean, there are people who only play from music, can you believe it? Just memorize the damn tune.

Julie Vallimont

Don't be looking at sheet music.

Amy Larkin

Right, because once you memorize it, that's when you can jump off from it. It's easier. What else? It's about the rhythm. Rhythm is king, keep the beat. I'm sure I'll think of a gazillion things after we hang up.

Julie Vallimont

Well, if you have any more words of advice, you can just email it to me and I'll add it to our podcast notes. And everyone can also get a personalized Hello from Amy.

Amy Larkin

Thank you so much, Julie.

Julie Vallimont

It's just been so fun to reconnect with you and just think about music and dancing again, it makes me smile. I can't wait to hear you playing again sometime whenever it happens with you and Benjamin or with anybody else around.

Amy Larkin

Maybe you and I will get to play sometime soon. Well, not soon, but sometime.

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