

# Contra Pulse Episode 35 – Sue Songer

## **Julie Vallimont**

This episode, Julie sits down with fellow contra dance pianist and CDSS Lifetime Contribution Award recipient Sue Songer. In addition to playing piano Sue also plays fiddle, coordinates and directs the Portland Megaband, and with her collaborator Clyde Curley compiled the 3 volumes of The Portland Collection: Contra Dance Music in the Pacific Northwest. Together these volumes comprise nearly 1000 fiddle tunes, all in the contra dance repertoire and they are widely used across North America and the UK!

## **Julie Vallimont**

In the interview Sue describes her journey from Suzuki violin lessons to support her daughter to becoming a fully fledged contra dance musician and organizer extraordinaire. They discuss the dance and music scene in the Pacific Northwest, the evolution of Sue's piano style, her knack for notating tunes, which lead to the origin of the Portland Collection, and the secret sauce behind the epic sound of the Portland Megaband. Sue also talks about her most recent publication, a book commemorating and celebrating the life and work of David Kaynor, her friend and frequent music partner.

## **Julie Vallimont**

Hello Sue Songer and welcome to Contra Pulse.

## **Sue Songer**

Hello, Julie. I am honored and happy to be here.

## **Julie Vallimont**

I am so happy to have you here. I'm very excited to meet you because we have not met yet and that's very thrilling for me.

## **Sue Songer**

Well, it's also something I've been looking forward to a lot. As you know, I have known of you and listened to your music now for quite a long time.

## **Julie Vallimont**

Well, I am very flattered or humbled or something, surprised, amazed to hear you say that because when I was first learning to play for contra dances the Portland Collection albums are one of the ones that I was listening to, because I was trying to figure out who all the different piano players were out there and listen to all their different styles. You were one of the first people who I listened to, so if I play contras, it's partly your fault.

## **Sue Songer**

Well, I'm happy to have that responsibility on my shoulders.

**Julie Vallimont**

So it's just so lovely to come full circle and get to chat with you today over Zoom and where are you right now?

**Sue Songer**

I am at home in Portland sitting in my office.

**Julie Vallimont**

What's the weather like today?

**Sue Songer**

It's mild blue skies, it's like a perfect Portland summer day.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's beautiful. It's mid August right now and I'm in Brattleboro, Vermont and it's raining here. So we traded weather for a day.

**Sue Songer**

You know, we'd take your rain. We haven't had any.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's so funny. I know. It's been crazy on the west coast in the summer.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. Really hot. Really hot. Yeah, really dry.

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of heat. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I know a lot of things are different now because of covid, I can only imagine...What's your musical life been like the last few months?

**Sue Songer**

So just before we started, I was reading an email from someone putting another gig at the end of October on hold. And that's, it's been mostly discontinuing the very few things that have been restarted. So you know, it's a test of patience.

**Julie Vallimont**

It is, we have to wait a little while longer.

**Sue Songer**

We do.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, I want to cut right to it because there's so many things about you that I don't know. Here's what I do know is that you play piano and fiddle. And you have several contra dance bands, including Joyride

and you are one of the leaders and organizers of the [Portland Megaband](#), which sounds like quite the epic adventure.

**Sue Songer**

The Megaband plays every other year at Folklife, because that's...you can't play any more often than every other year at [Northwest Folklife](#) on the contra dance stage. They have too many bands that want to play. But that, that's not the full Megaband, that is usually 40 to 50.

**Julie Vallimont**

Okay, that is the first and only time I've heard the Portland Megaband was my first year at Folklife. It was years and years ago. And I was a brand new contra musician, and I went out to Folklife. And it was so cool. So I can't even imagine what the whole phenomenon is. And then of course, you're also one of the people who assembled and has published [the Portland Collection books](#), which so many of us use for contra tunes. And then I also want to talk to you about [the new book that you've put out of David Kaynor's tunes](#). So, not all the interviews have like a bullet-point list of things to look forward to, but for our listeners, these are all the things I'm looking forward to hearing about and so many more. But before we get to that, why don't we start from the beginning. I would just love to hear a little bit about how you started playing music for contra dances and how that became a part of your life.

**Sue Songer**

All right. Do you want the long story?

**Julie Vallimont**

We have lots of time.

**Sue Songer**

Okay, I'll give you the long story. So I discovered contra dancing in the mid '80s. So it had been going for maybe five or six years here in Portland and I, I entered in and I loved it. I loved it and I especially loved the music and in fact, I used to feel like my real partner was the music. You know, the dancers were just, they were a pleasant accessory, but they were an accessory. So I was really wedded to music, but I, I never gave a thought to playing it. I was 20 years from having touched an instrument at that point and busy. And so I, after a couple of years of dancing, as life worked out, my daughter begged for violin lessons. And so I got her Suzuki lessons. I inquired and learned that that was the recommended thing to do. And the Suzuki teacher told me that because she was so young, I was going to have to learn to play the violin myself, so that I could teach. I had zero interest to learn to play the violin. But I want to be a good mom. So I rented a violin, and we got her, you know, a little kid violin and, and with practically the first bow stroke, I was hooked. I just thought, "Oh my gosh, I have got to learn to play this instrument." But I did not want to play the Suzuki repertoire. I thought if I'm going to learn this, I want to learn the contra dance music. So I...at that time in Portland there were...well there still are! There were monthly teaching sessions for people who wanted to learn how to play contra dance tunes: George Penk, and Clyde Curley, my two eventual recording mates, were running month-long classes for beginning musicians. And so I I took my fiddle and went to one of their sessions. And at that time, I had only played Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and Go Tell Aunt Rhody on fiddle. And I had never played on the D or the G string. And I didn't know whether I could. So I sat through the entire

teaching session with my fiddle in my case, because I was too shy to take it out. And, so that that ended up being the start of two things, although I had no idea at the time. So anyway, I sat and I remember the tunes that they taught were Kesh Jig and Lanigan's Ball. So after the whole thing was over, I asked, I didn't have a recorder or anything, I mean, I didn't know how this was done. And I asked if anyone had a piece of paper and I drew staff lines and went over to the piano and I notated the tunes. Because I'd learned them in my head and I played them on the piano and, and everybody gathered round this and, "What are you doing? You know how to write this stuff down?" And, and as it turns out, I did. So that was actually the beginning of the Portland Collections, although who knew at that time. So people told me there, because this had been going for some months and most people had played much longer than me, they said, "Well, you belong in the slow beginners, because you can't play." So there was there was another group I didn't know about called the slow beginners. That met at an alternate time. But I said "Well, okay, you know, whatever it takes for me to learn the music," you know, I couldn't keep up with this group. So I went to the very next slow beginners meeting. And on short order, I learned that I didn't belong there either. Because I couldn't play, I still couldn't play, but I could hear what they were supposed to be doing. And so very quickly, I started singing what they were supposed to be playing, because I could hear, you know, I knew how potatoes fit with, like the beginning of the music. And I knew how long a note should be held at the end of the phrase. I knew stuff like that. And so I thought, well, you know, I don't belong here either. So what I have to do is work really hard and keep up with the other group. Catch up and keep up. So that's what I did. And, so I I think at that time, I didn't have any thought of playing for dances. I had only recently learned that dance musicians weren't like gods.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wait we're not? What!?

**Sue Songer**

And I remember I was shocked when I first started dancing to learn that they weren't being paid hundreds of dollars a night...

**Julie Vallimont**

Or at all!

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, I mean, they were, they were just expert to me and I imagined they were total professional musicians that did this all the time and I was just amazed. That's how naive I was to learn that, that no, they had other jobs and you know, they got paid a pittance. And anyway, that was very surprising. So anyway, I stuck with this group, but I did catch up. I was very diligent about fiddle.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and just so that I can understand you played piano already at this point, like having played piano when you were a kid?

**Sue Songer**

I played piano I, I didn't have too much thought at that time about playing piano. For one thing Portland had a surplus of piano players. I think every fiddler in town was married to a piano player, including me, a new fiddle player, because my husband played piano. And so I didn't see too much opportunity. So I just pursued fiddle and stuck with this group, learned tunes and then I went to Fiddle Tunes, which is a huge music festival in the northwest and I saw...I couldn't play in any of those sessions. I was, that whole first year, I'd only played for fiddle for a year or so I was I was in this room with a big sign on the door saying "baby jammers." So I was, I was really happy in the baby jammers room. In fact, well, I'm kind of rambling and getting off track here but one of the high points of my musical life was being with a couple of friends and the baby jammers room and these people came in who we didn't know but we knew some of the same tunes. We all knew Bonaparte Crossing the Rhine. And we all knew like Golden Slippers. And so here are a group of people who were strangers sat down with us, and we could all play music together. And that was like a wonderful moment to discover.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Isn't that an incredible moment? For so many people who discover trad music, especially later in life where you don't grow up in it, it's like the first time where you can just sit down and play music with other people in an unstructured and spontaneous way. And it's incredible. I remember that those moments for myself I had been like a classical musician and a church organist and accompanist, but I never like jammed with people. And it was just so incredible.

### **Sue Songer**

Yeah, it was the same for me. And I, this reminds me of something I have thought of listening to your other podcasts and all these other wonderful musicians you've spoken with and their super rich backgrounds. You know, either they've studied the music of some kind or another or they grew up in a family that exposed them to lots of music, or they pursued their own interests of music and comparatively speaking, I was in a musical desert. You know with very little exposure. I grew up in a very tiny town in eastern Washington with one radio station, that we we were able to listen to one hour of rock and roll one night.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Wow!

### **Sue Songer**

And that was kind of, yeah, that and you know, the heydays of American Bandstand. So I, I came as a kind of blank slate, I guess you would say, when I arrived at the contra dance scene. I did not have any context to put it in. And so anyway, here I am at [Fiddle Tunes](#) and I'm discovering that I know tunes that other people know and we can play them together and it's just wonderful. And so I had a really good time, I hardly ever left the baby jammers room except to tour other, faster sessions. But at those sessions, I observed piano players and they could just follow along, you know, the, the tunes would change and the the accompanist would just change right along with them. And I was amazed at their ability to do this and so I decided I wanted to learn piano. So I could do that. And so I had the thought of playing in sessions before I had the thought of playing for dances. So then I began what I thought was probably a futile pursuit of piano. And I worked at that as well. And anyway, it led eventually to, "Gosh, do you think we're good enough to be a band?" You know, with some friends, and my husband. And so

we decided to give it a shot. And that, and we apparently were good enough, maybe just barely good enough to be a band, but we were good enough. And in that band there were two other piano players this, this is my typical experience. So I played piano for a third of the evening, in that band.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow.

**Sue Songer**

So that was my, my start.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow, switching off. Yeah, we all know that game of piano players kind of jockeying for time on the bench. You know, any piano player should learn another instrument so you have something to do when you're not playing piano. Yeah, I love your story because, you know, you come to trad music a little bit, you know, like not growing up in it, which is similar to my story, and then you've just become such a, an important person in spreading the love of traditional music to other people through your work with the Megaband and the Portland Collections. And it just really underscores the point for me that like trad music is for everybody. It's folk music, it's like, for everybody! It doesn't matter if you're a fancy player or not, there's a spot for everybody to participate. And making those opportunities for people is so important. And it's such a great way that you've really given back to the community. It's just wonderful.

**Sue Songer**

Well thank you, I, I really do believe what you said, that there is a place for everybody, whether they are you know, playing in a hotshot band, or playing with a small group, at a session or in their home...it's something that people can enjoy on many different levels. And you know, certainly, I just...I think when I set out I, I just wanted to be able to join other people musically. I didn't have big aspirations, you know, I didn't even imagine that I would be able to do it. And so I just hoped that I could enter in, you know, and sit down on the circle and keep up. So that was my main motivation.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, those little...just moments of connection and fun time.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah exactly. Exactly.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Do you remember what it was like when you were learning, in terms of like learning to play tunes by ear or learning to play chords? Do you remember any, like breakthrough moments or inspiration you got from other people?

**Sue Songer**

Um, hmm. Well, as it turns out, I'm, I'm a rather natural ear player. I didn't know that. When I wrote down, you know, that first teaching session that I was talking about, when I wrote down the music, I wrote it down because I had no idea of whether I would be able to remember it. And as it turns out, I

can remember. If I had any breakthrough moments it'd probably be in learning to read music, oddly enough, because I'm not a natural reader, I mean, that's a funny thing to say as someone who has put out all this, you know, written music. But I, one of the hard things for me is teaching people how to recognize chords. You know, how do you know if whether it's IV chord V chord, even if it's, you know, of course, that's always debatable. And, to my mind, well, it's a IV chord because it sounds like a IV chord. You know, it's like, how do you know if what is blue? Well, it's blue because it looks like blue. And so I, I guess that's something that came to me before I can remember. We'll just put it that way. The, I will say that when I first started listening to music, I probably only heard three or four chords in the tunes. No matter how many chords were played, I clumped them into, okay, minor [vi chord], IV, V, and I. And that that was probably the extent of how I could recognize them. And then as I got more familiar with the music, and maybe listen to the same things, again, I could hear many more, you know, maybe it's the ii minor and not just the V or things like that. So I my, my ear became more sophisticated as I listen. And, and I think people were doing more different things chordally, too, over the years that people were expanding from the basic chords more than the earlier music. So maybe there was more to listen to.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right and that timing coincided with when you were learning and paying attention to these things and developing your own style.

**Sue Songer**

Now I do remember how I went about learning a piano style, which is a little different than the question you asked and that...I had a cassette tape, this is pre-CD, of a group from Seattle called Salmonberry. And they, their piano player is woman named Pat Spaeth, and it was a very traditional sounding recording and the piano was really, really clear on that recording, and I liked it a lot. I really liked her style. So I took the cassette tape, and I went two measures by two measures and I'd play two measures and then I tried to imitate it. And I would go back over the two measures until I could do a reasonable facsimile of what Pat was doing. And then I moved to the next two measures and I played like four measures together and I went that way through a couple of their tracks. And I remember studying her and trying to figure out how she got the sound she was getting, you know, in a kind of disciplined way.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, so she was a big influence.

**Sue Songer**

She was, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you know her...who her influences were?

**Sue Songer**

No, I don't, she is, she is a really accomplished, accomplished musician on many levels. She's a woman who can play many, many different styles...it just flows out of her and she has left the Northwest

a long time ago. I know someone who might know how she learned on who she learned from but I, I don't know that about her.

**Julie Vallimont**

Maybe we can link to some things about her in the podcast notes, because that'd be really fun.

**Sue Songer**

I'll do some research on that. I know just the person to ask.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that'd be cool. Yeah, I love listening to your piano playing, you know, I don't know your, all the facets of your style I only know what I've heard on recordings from the other side of the country. But like, learning piano and listening to the Portland Collection albums was great because your piano playing is so clear and simple. And it is really just a really nice underpinning for the tune. And you play in this kind of traditional sounding boom-chuck style, but with like syncopations mixed in, and there's just something really light and bouncy about your playing. It has a lot of like grace and lift to it that I just really enjoyed a lot.

**Sue Songer**

Thank you! And that probably goes back to Pat Spaeth. Because her, her style had a lot of lift. And so I paid attention to how she did that. It seemed really textured, you know, not just like playing on a typewriter.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Do you know how that would translate to your hands? Like is there a way to verbalize without a piano in front of you like what that means for you?

**Sue Songer**

It means kind of sinking in and lifting off, and that's that's the best way I can put it the the up-and-downness of it. [Betsy Branch](#) calls it the "yumptiness."

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, the yumptiness, that's great!

**Sue Songer**

Yeah the yumptiness and trying to get some of that on piano.

**Julie Vallimont**

Because contra dancing is a "yumpty" kind of dance. It's an up-and-down dance at heart because it's a walking dance. And so you have this natural feeling. Yeah, it's great.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. So it's just and I, I sometimes will use a pedal to get that effect. You know, put it down and lift it off. Some people frown on that. My husband for one.

**Julie Vallimont**

I guess you have to use it in a way that fits your style, right? You're not just washing over the whole thing. Like a watercolor wash. It's more a very strategic...

**Sue Songer**

It is a strategic pedal, that's for sure.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. I use pedal sometimes when I want to hold a bass note and use my left hand for something else, which is not exactly the same way that you're using it. A lot of Cape Breton piano players use pedal when they play it's very common. You know, I feel like for contra dancing we often want a, I don't know, a cleaner, a drier sound. But it's very common. And you know, if used tastefully, the piano has those really rich sounds, especially in the lower strings. And when you have the pedal down the piano resonates in this really wonderful way.

**Sue Songer**

I have never thought of using a pedal to capture something on my left hand and then doing something else with my left hand but I am going to try that.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's really fun. It's really fun. I do it if I'm having especially a drama queen moment where you want to like, if you want to play an octave bass super low and heavy and then also play a block chord I might go like bass and then chord and be able to hit that chord with both hands at once...

**Sue Songer**

Oh my.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's really fun. Or especially in [Buddy System](#), when it's just a duo with me and Noah I just took it as a chance to figure out how much I could do as one person. And so I would often do some sustained bass note and then play my left hand above my right hand on the high end of the piano, kind of like you would do in classical music, which is kind of fun.

**Sue Songer**

Wow!

**Julie Vallimont**

You know, a little indulgent, but it's not for everything. Like I would just do it for moments or make a texture for some really beautiful, smooth tinkly thing where I wanted bass underneath it. I don't know, it's fun to think about. You can do anything you want really.

**Sue Songer**

Well, now I want to come watch you in action.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, you can play around with it, you know, like, that's all we do is we figure it out. Just like you use the bass pedal to add that richness to your playing. It's nice.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, so it's, I yeah, I don't know, it's just it's, I think putting in a variety adds to the lift.

**Julie Vallimont**

A variety of textures?

**Sue Songer**

A variety of textures, yeah. Because when you change, then, then that's the moment of lift so to speak.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are some of your favorite textures?

**Sue Songer**

Oh, goodness. Well, it just depends on the mood, I think. I, lifting off at the beginning, you know, to anticipate a phrase, creating a smooth texture for smooth jigs, creating, you know, a lot of drive that I don't know if those are exactly textures, but those are different approaches.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, it's a little hard to talk about music, in words, like that's the whole point of music is that it doesn't need words. So I know this is a bit of an abstract conversation. But it's just fun to hear how you think.

**Sue Songer**

Someone once told me I could give a whole workshop on the overuse of the V chord. But that is a way of creating a chordal texture, I guess you would say, you know, having that sustained V.

**Julie Vallimont**

Absolutely. And it's a tried-and-true contra dance trick that should always have a home in poor taste and contra dance music because it's just so fun for the band and the dancers to have those moments.

**Sue Songer**

It always works. It's just you know, you think "Do I dare do this again?" And then you do it again and it works again! You know?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I feel like playing for contra dancers, sometimes I feel like something's worth doing once it's worth doing twice. You know, might not do that in a concert setting but, I think it was [Anna Patton](#) and [Ethan Hazzard-Watkins](#), I went to one of their workshops years ago and they were saying like, you kind

of want to do something twice as long as you think, to give the dancers time to like, get into it and get used to it. You gotta be bigger than you think, right?

**Sue Songer**

I suppose, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you do all sorts of tricks with the Portland Megaband?

**Sue Songer**

Yes. Because there's so many options, you know? The, the biggest thing we do is probably the easiest thing. And it's simply crescendo.

**Julie Vallimont**

Dynamics!

**Sue Songer**

You know, get quiet and then get loud. And so that's, that's one of the...but there's you know, there's all kinds of sections that come in and out, there's harmonies, there's...people think of really silly things to do, and we often do them. There's lots of ideas.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's really fun. Yeah, there's a few videos of the Megaband, which we will link to in the podcast notes as well and people can watch

**Sue Songer**

Is one of those the can-can video.

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know what's the can-can video?

**Sue Songer**

Maybe I shouldn't give it away. Well, the, I guess it was the last time we had the Megaband dance, we've missed two years in a row now, we did a classical set. This was [Erik Weberg](#)'s idea, he had been lobbying for classical set for a while and so we played the William Tell Overture, Rondo Alla Turca, and I always get the name wrong, it's the can-can tune, the Infernal Galop, is that right? I don't think that's quite right...

**Julie Vallimont**

I don't know.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. So the dance that Erik wrote featured the can-can kick in it, and there's quite the prelude to that. So I'll be sure to send you a link to that video.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's wonderful. Can you sing a little bit of the can-can to refresh everyone's memory?

**Sue Songer**

[Sue sings the can-can melody] then there's, that's the A part, the last part [Sue hums the B part]. That.

**Julie Vallimont**

Legendary! I wanted to sing along with you but I know that because we're over Zoom it wouldn't be in time but everyone at home can sing along.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, or watch, and you'll, you'll get vintage Erik Weburg calling if you watch that.

**Julie Vallimont**

Fun, yeah. Yeah, where do members of the Portland Megaband come from? Are a lot of them new to their instruments?

**Sue Songer**

Um, well, I don't know quite the answer to that. They, they just appear and some of them are new to their instruments because there are no musical requirements for being in the band. You have to be able to commit to rehearsals and you have to have an instrument but the band has complete beginners. People who are aiming for one note a measure and, and then it has very accomplished players. And there's, there's a space for everybody, everybody's welcome. And I tell people, I really believe this, that everybody is creating...is bringing their energy to the band, you know, regardless of their musical level. Everybody is contributing a spirit and energy and it translates, it translates to the dancers, you know, when when you have 75 people, you know, all excited and eager to play at whatever level they're playing. So it creates just, quite a scene.

**Julie Vallimont**

I mean, that just sounds like joy amplified by 75, 85 people! I can't even comprehend.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, it kind of is, we our rehearsal space is our usual dance hall because the band is big enough that it takes up a good portion of the hall.

**Julie Vallimont**

On the floor of the hall, right? Do you all fit on the stage?

**Sue Songer**

Oh, heavens, no. No, no, we're, we have...the rehearsals are always open to you know, whoever wants to come observe. And so we often have actual, you know, audience sitting on the stage.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's so great. I mean, there's a few megabands that I know about here on the East Coast, there's [Rum and Onions](#) in the New Jersey area, sorry, I don't know exactly where they are but around there, Mid-Atlantic. There's [Roaring Jelly](#) in Boston. And there's always like the [NEFFA](#) Festival Orchestra and things like that, but I'm pretty sure you folks are the largest out of all of them.

**Sue Songer**

I don't know, Rum and Onions was really helpful to me getting started, by the way, I knew of them and I wrote to them at the beginning, saying, you know, I've been tasked with this band and do you have any suggestions? And they did. They were very helpful.

**Julie Vallimont**

What were some of the helpful tips they gave you?

**Sue Songer**

The one that has been really good, they said, use individual mics. Don't use area mics. And I think they gave me tips about how to rehearse. It was so long...this was 1996.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, that's a little while ago.

**Sue Songer**

I can't remember exactly what they said. I remember about the individual mics and we started that right away. And they gave me examples of tunes that would work, you know, tunes that have worked well, for them. Talked about the rehearsal schedule, and just were really supportive. I appreciated it very much.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's just great. When you're starting a new thing, just to have peers to, like moral support and give you guidance along the way.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. And that was the only similar band to what what we had in mind here and the first Megaband was really scrappy. It was it was 25 musicians. In fact, the very first rehearsal, it had been kind of my idea that I'd floated through Portland country dance community to gather you know, whoever wanted to play, like an all comers band. So that language for a while, and then one New Year's Eve, when they couldn't find any band to play, they said "Say, Sue, you know, that idea you had about whoever wants to play? Do you think you could do it for New Year's Eve?" And so I said, "Yes, if I can be a dictator." Well, I just thought I could do it, you know, with, I thought I can do it alone is what we'll say. Now, of course, I'm far from doing it alone. I've got lots of help. But anyway, so I asked everybody I knew if they

wanted to play and 25 people said yes. So we had our first rehearsal. And the first thing we played, I was just, I thought is a terrible idea. This is awful...so we tried to...and then one of the musicians turned to me and said, "That wasn't very good, was it?" And I had to agree. But anyway, we had two rehearsals, and by the second rehearsal we were, we were better. But when we played that gig, you know, we'd call for the fiddles and so the few fiddles would be playing whatever and the rest of the band would be saying, "Come on fiddles, come on fiddles, you can do it!" So that was the start.

**Julie Vallimont**

Fun cheerleading section. I mean, everything's got to start somewhere, right? And I'm sure people could dance to it.

**Sue Songer**

Well they, yeah, everybody liked it. I mean, looking back on it, and we actually have a video of that gig and we laugh at it when we see it now. Also it was so long ago, people look at the video and they say, now who could that be? Oh, my gosh, it's so-and-so because appearances, you know, have changed over the years.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah.

**Sue Songer**

So, anyway, that's how it started, and it grew from there.

**Julie Vallimont**

And then you've been playing for contra dance as yourself with Joyride and other groups of people...

**Sue Songer**

I have.

**Julie Vallimont**

...in a smaller format. What's that been like? What's the Portland contra scene been like over the last couple of decades, you've been playing in it?

**Sue Songer**

Um, well, it's like everywhere it's changed. So I've been playing in Portland, since probably the early '90s. And we've always, in that whole time, we've always had a dance every Saturday night here. So that's been constant. A few more have been added, the Joyride dance is on first Wednesday, and now there's a second Friday and a Thursday dance. So dancers have increased somewhat. Attendance has, for the most part been pretty good over the years. It's waxed and waned a bit, but pretty constantly well attended dances. When I first started dancing and playing the format of the dances was a lot different than it is now and I think it's the same everywhere. There were always a couple of squares. There was always a circle mixer. Usually a Sicilian circle. So you had a little more than half that were

contra dances, and then three or four dances that were something other than contras. And, and everybody danced those very happily. You know, there's, I don't remember hearing any complaints about "Oh, no, a circle mixer." But those have gradually fallen away. And I I think that's too bad. Because I liked the variety. When I started, there were very few dance weekends. Portland had a dance weekend. And there was a dance weekend in Seattle, but they were few and far between. And over the years, there's now kind of a dance weekend culture, you know, and a bunch of dancers that only go to dance weekends, and have kind of abandoned their local dances. The local dances here are still doing well. They're, like I mentioned, they've, they're pretty much all contras all the time. But they don't, they don't attract the full range of people who dance in Portland, because there are a number of people here, as everywhere, that just want to do weekends instead of the local dances. So, you know, now there's, I mean, there's kind of a social dance weekend culture, you know, where people have their friends from all over the country that they meet at weekends and they might not know their local people as well.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's right. Yeah. Because then there are a lot of local people who never go to dance weekend, or camps or whatever.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

Especially a lot of folks with young kids or other obligations.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. So there's this, this dichotomy. And when we come out with a pandemic, I, you know, who knows how all that's gonna land? Are people still going to want to travel coast to coast and, you know, follow, follow bands or callers around? Or are they going to stick closer to home or come back at all? Who knows?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and I mean, there are people already who are starting to travel for the occasional things that are still happening. But it's a question of is there enough critical mass to start it up on a big scale and is the time right and I'm glad that's outside of the scope of this podcast. I don't want to be the one making those decisions. It's, we all know it's not time yet, for sure. But you know, it's funny because we talk about "the dance community," but you know, it's a few different communities that are overlapping, and then not overlapping, more like a Venn diagram. You know like the local dances and then the dance weekends, and they interact or not. You know, I love the dance weekend community because that's how I've traveled for the last 10 years and met people all over the country and gotten to see a lot of different dance communities. And it's, it's so cool to be in a different state and then the same dancers are there. It's such a great, weird feeling. But then there's also just nothing like a community dance where it's literally the people who are your neighbors, and you meet people, and then you can hang out with them and be friends with them and jam with them. And so, yeah, it's an interesting change.

**Sue Songer**

It has, and I, the music has changed also, you know, from...I think when I started playing New England style was about the only thing going or at least the only thing that I was exposed to here in Portland. I know that, you know, Appalachian music was also doing fine in that region of the country. But here it was more connected, I think, to the New England stuff.

**Julie Vallimont**

What was the stuff from New England that you were listening to?

**Sue Songer**

Oh the New England Chestnuts.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's such a good album! Two good albums!

**Sue Songer**

Those are my very first...oh, I thought of something else about me now that this is all circling back, this isn't very organized discussion, maybe. So when, when I was dancing and not playing and heard a tune I liked, which was all the time, I always went running up to the band to find out the name of the tune. And the reason I wanted to find out the name was because I wanted to look for a recording with that tune on it so I could listen to it some more. And I was mostly out of luck, because there weren't that many recordings at that time. So I had the New England Chestnuts, I had Swallowtail, and I had the Foregone Conclusions.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, another quintessential New England band.

**Sue Songer**

And it seems like there were a couple more. Anything I could get my hands on I bought. I had this one set of cassettes "Shaking Down the Acorns" by Tony Elman, dulcimer player. I loved that I listened to this stuff all the time. And then I remember, not at the very first of my dancing, but Airplang came out [Rodney Miller](#), you know of course that was and so...in fact, my first recordings were LPs not cassettes. I have the LPs of New England Chestnuts.

**Julie Vallimont**

Do you still have them?

**Sue Songer**

I do. And... and the Foregone Conclusions

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, collector's items. I found the New England Chestnuts LPs at a Pinewoods auction and I bought them and I don't even have a record player anymore. But I still have them, they're great.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah I don't have a record player either. But I haven't gotten rid of any of those old things that and then after I got a little more familiar with the music I I have like a [Jerry Holland](#) LP and a [Graham Townsend](#) LP. I didn't know those names at first, you know, they weren't in the forefront of contra dance musicians. But as I just learned a little more and could branch out a little more. I found these other sources.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, Jerry Holland, I mean, for our listeners who might not be familiar with him, he's a legendary Cape Breton fiddler. And he played in the states and just had such a charismatic presence. And he could just make any tune sound great. And I think a lot of the Cape Breton tunes in our contra dance repertoire came to us via Jerry Holland.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, written by him or played by him.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I remember seeing him in Boston once and it was just such a great show. It was just so great. There's just some people who you're in a room with them and you just feel so good about everything.

**Sue Songer**

I was in Cape Breton a few years ago. And I ended up at a Cape Breton session due to Paul Cranford. I don't know if you know...

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah he has those publications.

**Sue Songer**

That's how I knew him. He was an email acquaintance, you know, lots of shared resources and copyright stuff. Anyway. The session that I was at was one that was started by Jerry and the piano bench had a bit Jerry Holland plaque on it and so everybody, I was, I was by far the worst player in the session, Paul had brought me fiddle and I, I was, I would have been very hesitant to pick it up but whenever I knew a tune and picked up the fiddle everyone at the session was so excited that I was playing along that I I felt okay about entering in, but everybody there can play the piano, you know, they all rotated on, on and off the piano bench. And I just thought I am not saying a word about piano, you know, I can't do this style and I will just be happy sitting here holding my fiddle most of the time. It was it was really fun.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, wow, what a great experience. Yeah. Speaking of local piano players, one of the people who is my biggest kind of mentor/show-me-the-ropes people was [Eric Anderson](#). Yeah, piano player from Seattle area. And the first time I went to Cape Breton was with Eric, and I was just so grateful for that chance to

go there and see everything that I'd heard about. You know, it's kind of like the first time I went to California in high school is like, oh, this is exactly what I thought California would be like, I've like looked at TV shows and culture about it for so long. And I felt that in Cape Breton...so great. But Eric's playing was also a big influence on me. And he would come out to the east coast to play with Celticladda with Randy Miller. And he was just so welcoming. He would let me sit on the piano bench next to him on stage at a dance and watch what he was doing and he showed me his tricks and stuff. So cool.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, he's a really dynamic player you know, who's quite connected to the dance when he plays.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah, so we were talking about New England tunes and how they migrated out to Portland. And what you first heard and how the music has changed. Since then.

**Sue Songer**

Yes. And then we got a little off track.

**Julie Vallimont**

No such thing as off track. We can talk about anything we want to! But I'll take us back to that.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, well there was some other ways that, I mean, I was listening, I guess we all were listening to the New England Chestnuts, but there were people who had moved to Portland from New England and brought their music with them actually, [Creighton Lindsay](#) who had moved here from Maine, and brought a bit of Maine repertoire. And a guy named Christy Keevil, who came from Massachusetts somewhere and he was a caller and musician here for a while. So there was some cross pollination early on.

**Julie Vallimont**

Have you seen the music change? Like I assume at some point [Wild Asparagus](#) started touring out there, I know George [Marshall] has done things on the West Coast for a long time.

**Sue Songer**

Well, I know that when they began to come here, which was, oh, it was pretty early on in my own dancing experience, a lot of bands then wanted to emulate them. And, in fact, have you heard the term "comparagus?"

**Julie Vallimont**

No!

**Sue Songer**

Well, a friend of mine who I will not name talked about an experience that is common to a lot of musicians back then, especially from when Wild Asparagus was just starting to come, you know, do their national stuff. They'd, they'd have a gig and the gig organizer would say, "Oh, you know, you did a

really good job, it was a great dance. So happy to have you here. You know, a week ago Wild Asparagus was here. And we had, like, double the people!" and that would always, you know, leave this friend feeling a little diminished. And that's such he came up with the term "comparagus".

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. So...

**Sue Songer**

Oh go ahead...

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, no, I was...yeah, go on.

**Sue Songer**

Well, anyway, I haven't heard that so much anymore. I think there are, you know, so when Wild Asparagus started, they were one of a kind. And, and they still are, you know, they're...there's no one else like them. But there are also a number of other bands who are super accomplished, and play out a lot. So it's, I guess, the, you know, the comparison would be across a broader spectrum now, you know, and you could plug any band into that name, you know, your band was fine, but last week, we'll say Buddy System was here!

**Julie Vallimont**

A lot of the Portland dances you get bands traveling all over the country, even for your weekly dance, which is how I've gotten to play there a few times. I love the Portland dancers. They're so fun, super friendly, welcoming and high energy. I love it. It's one of my favorite places to play in the whole country.

**Sue Songer**

I'm glad to hear it and the one time I've seen you, which was at Fulton Park, that's our dance hall, that's our main place.

**Julie Vallimont**

What are most of the bands in Portland like these days? Is there a Portland sound?

**Sue Songer**

Is that kind of like asking a goldfish what the water is like?

**Julie Vallimont**

Right, well, maybe, maybe and there doesn't have to be you know, it just sounds like contra music. That's the funny thing about being a touring musician is that when I go play somewhere because I'm the band, I never get to hear the other bands. It kind of drives me crazy.

**Sue Songer**

Well, I would say that almost all the Portland bands have a piano or keyboard backup. That might not be the case everywhere. I don't know, you know you'd have to ask...I can't say, I'm sorry. I don't know, we play...all of the music in the Pacific Northwest is deeply impacted by Fiddle Tunes, which is this, usually, annual event that brings in musicians from all over the continent, tradition bearers, usually Quebec, Cape Breton, Appalachia, Texas, Tex Mex, even Mexico so that filters down through everyone here. I think the Portland and Seattle sounds will be pretty similar. We don't have, at least not yet, anything much like Buddy System or like, I'm blanking on the name. The two guys, Perpetual e-Motion? There's not much of that going on here.

**Julie Vallimont**

So when you are you talking about Buddy System you're talking about the techno version of Buddy System and Perpetual e-Motion. So there's not a lot of like, electronic influenced contra music out there.

**Sue Songer**

Portland has, every time there's a fifth Saturday, it's an all comers open band. So between that and the Megaband, it's hopefully welcoming to musicians at any level.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's great.

**Sue Songer**

So it's probably pretty deeply rooted in tradition here.

**Julie Vallimont**

It sounds like a lot of different influences. Because, you know, Fiddle Tunes and you have had tunes from all over the place, and all over the country mingling together, which is a lot of what the tunes are in the Portland Collection. There's tunes from all different fiddle traditions in there. So in a way that's kind of reinforced the national sound of contra dance music, because a lot of new contra dance musicians go to the Portland Collections when they want to learn new tunes, or just play tunes that they have in common with each other.

**Sue Songer**

Yes, it has turned out that way.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's funny, like, we all have our ripples. I think I remember reading you writing that you were just writing down tunes that you were learning as you were learning them and then it sounds like other people started asking you for them. I'll let you tell the story from there of how that turned into what it is now.

**Sue Songer**

The long story again?

**Julie Vallimont**

That's totally up to you.

### **Sue Songer**

Well, going back to earlier, yes, I started writing tunes down from the very beginning, because I had no idea whether I would be able to remember them. It just was a habit that formed very, very quickly whenever I learned a tune, and at that time, I guess that's another thing that's changed quite a lot and maybe part of that is due to the Portland Collections, but when when I started learning, it was all taught by ear. There weren't that many written sources and musicians here, George and Clyde and other players, they learned by ear from recordings. So that it was very much an oral tradition and so pretty soon, well, pretty soon after a year or two, I had quite a collection of tunes that I had learned. People started asking me for it and people from other places started asking me for it, but I was still a new musician and even though people said, "Why don't you turn it into a book?" I thought, well, who am I to create a book of contra dance music. I'm not Randy Miller, or George Marshall, I'm just a newcomer who's barely able to play for dances, and how audacious to think of doing a tune book. So anyway, I pretty much dismissed all those suggestions, even though it was obvious there was a lot of interest in this packet of music I had, which I sold only for copying costs. I'd run it off, as I added new tunes, I'd go to what was then Kinkos and make new copies and charge people \$3.50 or whatever for the copying cost for this whole thing. But at that time, I was a psychologist with a private practice. I had been looking to get out of the private practice for actually a number of years but one thing or another kept me from doing that. One of the things that kept me from doing that was, well, what else am I gonna do if I don't do this? But there came a point in the practice where every single person who I was seeing was in good shape and I thought, I could leave. I could leave right now, and no one would be hurt. And so even though I didn't know what I was going to do, I thought, well, I'm going to take a year off. I will just do it, and kind of reassess my life. So it didn't happen right away, it took time to wind down with everybody. But after two or three months, I found myself without my psychology practice, and wondering what I was going to do. And I was on a walk, and all of a sudden these three things came to me all at once. It's gonna sound a little silly when I say it, but one of the things was, I could do a book, I could do a music book. But the reason I thought that, I had this other idea, because I still knew, this is 1994, I'd only been playing music for four or five years. I'm still really quite a newbie but I thought, I know I can notate accurately and that's all I need to be able to do because the the music will speak for itself. I don't have to be an authority on the music as long as I can write the notes down and I can do that. And then I thought, why don't I ask Clyde, if he wants to do it with me, Clyde Curly because Clyde, who I didn't know very well, I knew he could write, he was an English teacher and he had been playing for at least 20 or 30 years at that point. He'd been playing since he was a teenager and playing for dances. He played many instruments in all the genres. I thought, wow, that would cover all my lack of authority base because Clyde will be able to help with that. The third idea I had and they just came to me all at once was, if I ask other people in Portland if they would let me notate their repertoires, it would be such a much better, broader piece of work than if I just use my own tunes. So those were my ideas. That's what I set out with. I did not own a computer. I had no idea how to use a computer. So that was another early decision. Do I want to do this on computer? So Clyde and I started out and Clyde, the first thing he said to me, he came over to our house and slapped down his notebook on our table. He says, "You think anyone will actually buy this?" Because he did not see any use for a music book, he was a

total ear player. He couldn't imagine that anyone would want to learn music by reading a book, that was just beyond him. But the idea of doing some research on the tunes and finding out more about the tunes and being able to write that part down, that part appealed to him. The notation part did not. So neither Clyde nor I are very good music readers and that ended up being an advantage in a weird way. Because in order for the two of us to be able to read this music, it had to be like super clear or we couldn't do it. So if there was anything that was confusing about the notation, I had to fix it because Clyde and I couldn't use it. I asked all the bands in Portland and there were, gosh, five or six at that time. They all said yes. I also got in touch with [Bill Matthiesen](#), who I didn't know. I didn't know him then and asked him for help on how to contact composers, how do you deal with copyrights because Waltz Book One was out at that time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, for our listeners, Bill is the person who released the Waltz Books of which there are now four, am I right?

**Sue Songer**

Yes, he was working on Waltz Book Two when I got in touch with him, and so he was just immensely helpful as far as helping me figure out how to go about things and I just asked everybody for ideas. Oh, in fact, I made samples. Once I had learned how to notate and figured out how to use a computer and all that stuff I made samples of possible notations, different sizes, different fonts, and laid them out in front of anyone who would take a look at it and say what one do you like? I got two guiding principles. One person said, I want to be able to read the music from the floor so make it big enough that I could put it on the floor and read it. Now that was years ago when we were younger and I don't know if our aging eyes can still read the music from the floor but at one time we could. Someone else said I want it to be small enough so that I can get three of them on one eight and a half by 11 sheet of paper in a medley.

**Julie Vallimont**

We used to do that in my first contra dance band. I didn't know any tunes, and I had to accompany them. A lot of the tunes they played were in the Portland Collection and so I would go to work and photocopy each page and make my little copy and paste medleys and I had a whole binder of them in the beginning, like so many of us have done that.

**Sue Songer**

And you could get three on page couldn't you?

**Julie Vallimont**

I could, as long as they weren't four part tunes.

**Sue Songer**

So you've got, you've got a musician in Portland to thank for that. So anyway, we had a little more than 300 tunes. We decided not to print any that could be found easily in a couple of different sources. So if the tune was in O'Neill's and Cole's [1,000 Fiddle Tunes] and the New England Fiddler's Repertoire, no

matter how good a tune it wasn't going to be in the Portland Collection, because people could find it elsewhere.

**Julie Vallimont**

So the Portland collection isn't exactly like a literal snapshot of what people were playing in Portland at the time because there's probably a lot of common tunes, like New England tunes, for example, that didn't end up in there because it wasn't necessary to put them in.

**Sue Songer**

Yes. And another way that it's not representative of what was played at Portland, then is any tune with a composer is the composer's version, not what we played. So if it was way different than how we played it in Portland, I would put an alternate version in. But most composers wanted the tune printed the way they wrote it, they would say, I don't care how it's played but this is how I intended it. So this is how I would like you to print it.

**Julie Vallimont**

That was one of my favorite things about the Portland Collections. When I was learning, it's like looking at the alternate versions of tunes and just learning about the folk process. Now we know there's infinite versions but in the beginning, it's easy to think, well, this tune just goes this way and everyone plays it the same way. Obviously, there's a billion different versions of tunes. There's as many versions as people who play them and reading the back where you talked a little bit about the origins of each tune, I took that book and I put it on my nightstand and I would read the little blurbs about the tunes before I went to bed at night like a magazine.

**Sue Songer**

Does that mean they were putting you to sleep?

**Julie Vallimont**

No, I had some good reading.

**Sue Songer**

When people tell me that I always say well, thank you, I'll tell Clyde. Because well, if you're using them for bedtime reading, do I want to tell him that?

**Julie Vallimont**

For me, that's my me time, that 15 minutes before I fall asleep is when I could read about whatever I want. So it's true, I can't read fiction before bed because I'll just stay up all night finishing it so it has to be nonfiction. So these are great because they're little stories but they're little bite size nuggets and you read a few and then you get tired.

**Sue Songer**

You can quit anytime.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, then it's right there but I really was just so fascinated with this idea of learning how tunes get passed from person to person, how they change in the process because it's just like a story about we're all connected through this tradition, which is really beautiful.

**Sue Songer**

I agree. That was one of the fun things is tracing some of these back to their source and on many occasions, especially in the second and third book, the source would turn out to be an actual composer who'd gotten lost along the way.

**Julie Vallimont**

You probably got to meet and chat with a lot of interesting people while you were putting this together?

**Sue Songer**

Many. I have some very good composer stories probably not fit for massive broadcasting.

**Julie Vallimont**

Someday you can release some memoirs and you could share those stories, or not. I mean, now that you're kind of on the other end of this, and there are now multiple Portland Collections and now as you know, they're all over the country...I don't know how to ask this question. But what's that like? How has the effect been for you as a person and also in the contra world from your perspective?

**Sue Songer**

Well, I know more about that than "What's music like in Portland." I will say that when the first book came out, we released it at the at the Folklife Festival. I was completely overwhelmed by the response. Because it was it was just instant, I sold out of everything that I took up there and had orders that I took home with me that I couldn't fill, and people coming up to me congratulating and wanting to know more about it. I was just not prepared for anything like that, at all, so at first, it was, like, surprise. I remember, shortly after it came out, I got a phone call from someone in Maine who wanted to know how they could get a copy. I said, well, how, how did you even find out about this? And you know, this is way before Facebook and social media, it was 1997. So they said, well, I said I work on a crew of a ship and a whistle player was playing out of the book, and I thought it was the most beautiful music I'd ever heard and so I want a copy for myself. I was thrilled and amazed because a driving force behind it really was that I just loved the music so much and I thought other people would love it too if only they had an exposure to it. Because at the time it was still, except for Fiddler's Fake Book and Cole's and New England Fiddlers Repertoire it was still mostly an oral tradition. That was a roadblock to a lot of people. I just thought it deserved a wider audience. I think I was really motivated by wanting people to be able to enjoy the music that I was so crazy about. That sort of early validation from whoever that was who called me from Maine, and I have no idea if they ever were in the music or anything. But I thought wow, this is why I did it. So I've had some amusing experiences. Being places where everybody's got their Portland Collections out and they don't realize that I'm Susan Songer. I have to say that very tongue in cheek, so that's that's been interesting. I know that it has enabled many people to have access to music and be able to play it. I'm really, really happy about that, because that was the whole point in the first place. I'm stunned that it has become as widespread as it did. In fact, I think before it even came out I was on a road trip with David Kaynor and we were, we were calculating, now if every contra dance

musician in the United States should buy this book, how many would that be? We figured, we said well, let's just say there are 50 musicians per state. You know, figuring that there's like 300 in Massachusetts and two in some other states, on average about 250 and that would be 2500 books. Wow, could that possibly happen? And of course it has, to our shock, but I'm glad, I'm glad that so many people want to learn the music and have the books. My wish is that people would use the books as a starting point and not a stopping point and that won't happen, it just doesn't because people have all different reasons for wanting to play and learn the music. So for many reading the tunes off the page, that'd be great. It gives them pleasure, and they have exposure to the music or they have exposure to the written music, I'll say, cause I'm still led by ear. But my hope is that it could inspire people also to experiment with it to learn farther than than the books to feel free to vary it. I don't like it when people think of the version in the Portland collection as well that's the way it goes cause that's how it's written down. No, no, no, no that is not correct. That's the way it was once upon a time for one person.

**Julie Vallimont**

It seems like in in putting the Portland Collection together, there's only so much you can do to worry about whether something is the "right version" of a tune unless it's by a modern composer that you know, but otherwise, I imagine you put in the version that is submitted to you. Because, how do you vet what is the one version of a tune? It doesn't exist.

**Sue Songer**

No, you're right. We put in the version of whoever sent it to us unless they had gotten it from someone else in Portland. We tried to get it back to the Portland source, whoever that was. But if that's the way they play it, then that's what we printed. I...oh you go...

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh no you go ahead.

**Sue Songer**

I had to completely redo the first Portland Collection, I had to enter it from scratch a few years ago, because the when it was first printed, it was printed from hardcopy. So there were six or seven runs on the hardcopy, and then the printer said, we can't get another run out of this, you're gonna have to give us what is now called camera ready, electronic version, or new hardcopy. I couldn't do it, because the program that I had used was completely defunct, it hadn't upgraded with computer upgrades. I had to get Finale and I had to notate everything from scratch again.

**Julie Vallimont**

So much work!

**Sue Songer**

Yes, it was. But when I was doing that, Clyde and I made the decision to only change outright mistakes, and we found plenty to change. We'd look at a tune and say, if we don't play it, why don't we put those chords on it? Good grief, those are bad chords, or we don't play it like that anymore. We had to overcome this really strong urge to change to what we considered maybe better in some cases, or just

more current, but we didn't do it, we kept we the original as it was, unless it was a mistake. Just looking back when we did that, it was really obvious how so much of it had changed over time.

**Julie Vallimont**

Is that in the way that people were playing the tunes was different? What were some of those changes?

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, a lot. Well, for me, I might use whatever's written down as some kind of starting point, I'm talking about fiddle now. I'll be playing away and I'll start playing the tune with someone else and I'll say, where'd that version come from, and they'll say, the Portland Collection.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's funny.

**Sue Songer**

It would have been probably how I started out with it. But for whatever reason, probably as much because I forgot how it was supposed to go as anything else or maybe something was too hard for me to play and I found an easier way to get around a certain passage. I just made changes that I totally forgot because I'd left the the dots behind quite a long time ago. I don't know that they were improvements, although I will say some of the chords that we had played but did not put in were improvements, they were just different so those will never be written down.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's like a lot of us have experienced that feeling of you go to a session, and they're playing a tune and then there's someone at the session, like, someone will say, oh, let's play the name of this tune, like, oh, I know how that goes. They assume they know how it goes and they play their version. They kind of forget to listen to what the other people are playing. So there's two different versions of the tune going on. So what's cool about the Portland Collection is it's not trying to be, at least doesn't seem to be trying to be, a definitive anything, like you say, it's a starting point, where I can be like, oh, I learned this tune this way from the Portland Collection but here, they're playing it this way. You always have to keep that listening brain on to be in this place, in this moment, this is how we're going to play it. But having a rough start of how the tune goes, you have the outline of the tune in your mind, and often that's helpful, sometimes it's confusing if you already think you know a tune. I think a lot of people may come to the Portland Collections, and they're used to playing sheet music, like, they learned Suzuki as a kid or written sheet music as a piano student, or whatever. And so they have that mentality of, well, this is how it goes. But then like you say, as you get deeper into the music you learn more about how tunes work, and you learn how to play with other people, and you learn that it's just a suggestion and everything should be taken with a grain of salt. I was just interviewing Sam Bartlett a couple weeks ago and he writes a lot of tunes, and he doesn't even agree with his own notation of his own tunes. It's like, how do you even write out your own tunes when you write them? It's just a starting off point. Do you have an estimate of how many books you've sold in total?

**Sue Songer**

Um, you know, that's one of the things I could have researched and didn't. That's very hard. I can I have all that information. But the reason it's hard, is because every printing has a different number of books printed in it, for instance, the first printing was 1000 books, the second printing, and I'm just talking about Portland I, was 1500. At some point, I went to 4000 per printing. And it's, I'd even have to look, run over and grab a copy to see what printing it's on. It's on the ninth or tenth. So...

**Sue Songer**

So even just order of magnitude we're in the tens of thousands.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, it is. So it's, it's sold many. And I of course, I have all that documented. But I don't have it...

**Julie Vallimont**

It's just so cool! Think of all those...there's so many contra musicians out there. Look at all the people who want to play contra tunes! It's a fun way to track that. I mean, some of them are bought by camps and festivals, and a lot of people share and a lot of people never buy one and they photocopy them, which we should add is it's good to give your money to the publishers and the composers of the tunes. But if you have inherited a bunch of photocopies just go out and buy a book and then you can support the cost. Yeah. But that's, it's a fun, obviously, it was a need that the community didn't even necessarily know it had. And you weren't necessarily trying to answer that need, except that you'd needed it. And there were a lot of people like you who also needed it.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, it filled a niche. Yeah, it really did. And so I was just lucky that way, you know, to have the time, you know, I'd taken that year off, I never went back to being a psychologist, by the way. But I didn't know of course, that that was you know, just like when I notated that first tune at the my very first teaching session that ever went to I had no idea what that was going to lead to. I didn't know when I began that what was supposed to be a year off that I'd never go back. But that's the way it works.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it'd be interesting to combine that with a snapshot of like, I've just be curious to take a snapshot at each of these different regional areas, like, what is a snapshot of what people are playing at any one moment, you know, like, which is not exactly the purpose of the Portland Collections, but it is a, it's, the funny thing about when you put things in a book is that it becomes a snapshot of what was played in a place, but then that also becomes what is played in a place. Because it becomes an easy point of reference for people. And so you know, it's important for us not to also lose the tunes in our local traditions that aren't in the collections. And so whether that means everybody make their own regional pamphlet that they spread, send out to people or like a PDF, if you're having an open band or something where there's sheet music available for the tunes that aren't in the Portlands, or whether we do more and more Portlands or you know, whether there becomes other versions of it, you know, that other people put out, but I just think, to me, it's so fascinating to take a snapshot of what tunes are being played and why and how tunes...they have weird lives of their own, like little celebrities where they go in and out of style. And they get forgotten about or they get overplayed and then nobody wants

to play them. And, and I'm sure the Portland Collections have affected their life trajectories in lots of different ways.

### **Sue Songer**

Well I'm imagining that, you know, when you would go back and think about change changes over the years that the music has gotten a little more homogenized across the country, from what it was, say, in the 80s, when there wasn't, there wasn't nearly as much opportunity, you know, for cross pollination. People weren't traveling, we didn't have the weekends, people weren't traveling as much. There wasn't social media for people shared stuff back and forth. They weren't Portland Collections. Now there are all these things that make sort of a national repertoire more possible. And when, you probably have experienced this point, you are at a weekend somewhere new, the music that's being played by the locals is often pretty familiar to you.

### **Julie Vallimont**

Often, not always. Yeah, it's fun. I mean, sometimes I go to communities where there's a lot of old time music, and I know some of the old time tunes, but I'm not an old time musician. So there's a lot of tunes, I don't know. And that's always fun. And then, you know, there's a lot of tunes that are in the Portlands and we all know them and love them. You know, and then I think this is funny thing of, like, for some of these "hotshot" bands, as we've referred to them, you feel almost this pressure to play tunes that aren't published anywhere. To make yourselves cool or interesting, or just fresh or or maybe you just want to feel fresh. I'm not saying it's like a snobby thing. You know, like, in, in my bands, I don't know, I'm a piano player. I'm not a fiddler, but I love finding new tunes. It's just so fun to like, hunt for them, it's like, picking wildflowers or something, you know, and, and there's just this cool feeling of like, I found this new tune, and it's really old, but nobody plays it. And it's not published anywhere. And it's like ours for a while. But you can't let that come at the expense of the tradition, you also have to work in these really great traditional tunes. And, and, you know, the ones that are in the books are in the books, often for a reason, or they were really cool once and nobody wants to play them now and that's also okay. You know it's just funny thinking about them that way.

### **Sue Songer**

So where do you look for tunes when you go hunting?

### **Julie Vallimont**

I mean, I used to learn a lot of tunes from recordings when I was starting. Like, it's easy to learn tunes from books, I used to sight read tunes from the Portland Collections. But that's not learning the tune, that's learning the shape of the tune, that's like a two dimensional silhouette of a tune, it's not the tune. So you learn a tune in a recording and then I will find five or six different recordings of the same tune of different people and try to learn it that way. Now, my favorite way is just to learn from people. It's like the only way, so I'm back to where Clyde has always been, right, like he's been there this whole time. But I just love learning a tune from a person and having the story and the place and their style and those memories all mixed up together. It's the best. And then when I teach it to someone, or they get it from me at a session by accident, or we play it at a dance, and they're like, "I just recorded that, what was that?" I can be like, "Well, I learned it from this person. And they learned it from them." And that's my favorite.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, I agree. That's also my favorite. It's really wonderful to have a person to associate with the tune. And often it's not only a person, but it's the whole context that the person was in. Maybe it was four o'clock in the morning at some session. Someone started a tune that you learned or maybe, you know, it could be anywhere, but that whole thing comes back with the tune.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. But then I love having friends, and I'm not so much one of these people, I do it a little bit, but people who love to find old books of tunes. Because learning tunes from people doesn't help us remember the tunes we've all forgotten that exist that are great tunes. And so I love having friends who are like, "Oh, I was in the Ralph Page library, and I found these old New England tunes that nobody plays or found this, like old book of tunes from Brittany" or, you know, whatever it is, or people who read through all of Cole's Fiddle Tunes and like, this one's cool, nobody plays it. And so yeah, keeping them in the tradition if they're good enough to stick around. And like there's a lot of really great old obscure recordings. You know, like I know people who like collect old obscure recordings of Irish music, and there's just so many good tunes on there that don't get played.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah I like listening to those too. I like listening to all the scratches and you know, the poor recording quality and sometimes questionable backup players. It just creates a, you know, an atmosphere for me that I...I like to experience.

**Julie Vallimont**

I would be curious to talk with you now about [the book that you did of David Kaynor's tunes](#). A lot of us haven't heard much about it because it's so new, I'd love to hear about it.

**Sue Songer**

Oh, where to start. It's, it has three parts. So the tunes are one part, but there is also a lot of autobiographical information, and then there's a whole section on his dances. So have you seen the book at all?

**Julie Vallimont**

I've never seen it.

**Sue Songer**

Have you seen me hold up pictures of it?

**Julie Vallimont**

No.

**Sue Songer**

Okay. So I'm going to do that. And I'm sorry for all the listeners who might want to edit this out. But I'm gonna go...

**Julie Vallimont**

We'll take it. I'll take a snapshot and we'll post it on the podcast notes.

**Sue Songer**

Okay, well, I can actually send you files of this stuff, because what I want to show you is the art. So David was quite a graphics artist. And there are, there's one...

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, his calligraphy.

**Sue Songer**

Yes. And I'm just kind of thumbing through. There's one...let me get to one of my favorite one.

**Julie Vallimont**

So Susan's holding this book up, and it's all the dance flyers in his hand inked calligraphy and things like that. So it sounds like you've interspersed those throughout the book?

**Sue Songer**

There are about 30 of them in the book. Oh, here's another. Anyway, that's probably enough to give you a sample of what they're like. But I can...

**Julie Vallimont**

Can you hold one up in front of the camera and I'll take a snapshot to share with...

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, but I can also send you the actual file that's got this on it.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's fun, the snapshot of our Zoom call because it has your face in it! And then we can add both of them.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. So I'll send some. So David, I've known David for a long time. He was a good friend and music partner as well. And, so when he got his ALS diagnosis, I asked him, you know, when Clyde and I finished [Portland Collection] book 3, I said I would never do another book. And if Clyde asks, he said, "Can I write the first sentence of book 3 saying this is our last book?" "Yes, you can! It's our last book." But somehow, one day, when David got his ALS diagnosis, I, I just felt this big desire to put everything he'd done in a book. And it turned out to be a lot more than I had bargained for, we could say. So he, he wrote, he wrote as much of his autobiography as he could. But he didn't start writing until he was confined to bed, and couldn't do couldn't travel and play anymore. And so he wrote here's...I've got a lot of pictures of him from his family. So after he had written maybe half or only a third of his autobiography, he lost his ability to type. And he was reduced to using eye gaze technology. So he had other people finish up that part for him, which in a way is good, because they probably wrote more about him than he would have written about himself. So other people wrote about his involvement of

[Ashokan](#) Northern week and the [John C. Campbell Folk School](#) and the fiddle orchestras that he'd led. So that's all in there. Then we have his music, 70 some tunes that he wrote, and 50 some harmonies that he wrote for his tunes. So that's one, that's one unique feature of the music is David was known for his harmony playing. So like here, as you can see, there's the the actual tune and the harmonies below it. And then he published in the early 90s, a little he called it a booklet called "Calling for Beginners, by Beginners." And so that entire book is also in here. And then...[Susan gestures at book] anything with this line around it is from Calling for Beginners and then at the end, there are 50 some dances that he wrote. So it's all in all 296 pages 8 1/2 by 11. There's there's lots of quips and stories and anecdotes and humor. And people tell me that David's voice is coming through very clearly in the book, I'm really happy about that. So, oh, another feature is that David wants his music to be all freely available to anyone who wants it, no copyright. So we took the copyrights off it. He had one tune that was BMI, removed the BMI. And, eventually, I am going to put PDFs of all of his music on my website so people can just download it for free.

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh, that's wonderful.

**Sue Songer**

That's what he wanted. So that finished in July, I started it in November of 2018. And when I could, when I could rope him in to help me, David is a moving target, he was a very busy guy, he, you know, with music on his mind all the time, as in playing music, not sitting down to talk about it. So anyway, I was able to capture him and nail him down several times for you know, for...so we could really map things out along the way. And, and I sent him sample copies along the way too. And he, the last one he had was almost complete, maybe 85% complete.

**Julie Vallimont**

What an amazing feeling to like, see that in front of you, you know, it's kind of like part of your life's work, all in one place.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, unexpected. Yeah, I know, I really am not going to do another book. But yeah, but this one was, it's, it kept me very connected to David, you know, from his diagnosis through his death.

**Julie Vallimont**

How did you originally meet him?

**Sue Songer**

Well, he came to the northwest a lot. Beginning probably in the early '90s. And he started spending a couple months a year out here. And he traveled between Portland and Seattle. And a lot of it was gig motivated. And a lot of it was personal relationships motivated. And so on one of those trips, and maybe I told you this about him, I can't remember, but my first evening when I had the piano entirely to myself was with David. And that's kind of funny, you know, it makes sense that it wasn't with a Portland person because we have so many [piano players] here. That was my my first whole piano dance was David and George Penk and a cello player, [Fred Nussbaum](#). And so that combination worked and we

anyway, from there on, I just started playing with him. Whenever he came to the northwest and we played all kinds of places. You know, from church basements, to little grange halls to Folklife and big dances and everything in between. And then I I traveled to the east coast. I did a bunch of stuff with him there also.

**Julie Vallimont**

What did you do out on the East Coast?

**Sue Songer**

Well, once I played the Flurry with him. I did two New England tours with him and two different bands. We had a band, The Time Zones.

**Julie Vallimont**

Apt.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. And so [Rex Blazer](#) and [Peter Siegel](#), were in that band that formed up at Fiddle Tunes one year.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's some fun personalities in that band.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. So anyway, The Time Zones did both the Northwest tour and a New England tour. And then I did the John C. Campbell dance musicians week with David for 10 years. And that group also did a New England tour. [Naomi Morse](#) was in it at the time. And then Naomi was replaced by Betsy Branch. And so there was a New England tour with that group and then a bunch of southern stuff with the Betsy version of John Campbell. So anyway, and I've been I visited him in Montague a bunch anyway. So from from his trips out to the northwest, there was all this other stuff. We just hit it off, you know, he stayed here with my husband and me many, many times.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. It seemed like he really had a home on the west coast. I remember playing a dance weekend with him on the west coast. And it was like you walk in and he just knows all the dancers like he lives there. And for us, it's like, I don't know, one of our first couple times and I'm like, "Whoa, David, you have this whole other life that we don't know about!"

**Sue Songer**

It's true. He does. He did. And not only in Portland but, well, I think Portland and Seattle were the biggest chunks of his time away from New England, but he went a number of other places to on a regular basis.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, there, there aren't a lot of callers like him these days. You know, like I remember, especially at that dance weekend, I remember him, like, telling a lot of stories from the mic and jokes. He's got this

pretty casual, conversational vibe going on. And it's funny, at dance weekends, not all dancers want that. They want to just dance, dance, dance. And sometimes I think it's a shame. I understand that they want to dance. But on the other hand, you've got these callers in front of you who just have so much to offer. And also, he knows, you know, he would know that when he's talking, it's giving a chance for other people to be talking as well. Like, he's, it's like part of setting a tone of everyone is welcome. And everyone can be comfortable. Even if you're not a fancy dancer, by making the whole thing feel a little bit more relaxed. But just like we talked about tunes, not a lot of...not all dance weekend dancers want that energy. They want it tight. And they want it polished. They want the newest dances with the coolest choreography.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, well, one one interesting feature of doing this book, on David's dances section, you probably know that he never wrote any of his dances down. That's not quite true. He wrote a few of them down. So but yeah, when it came to collecting his dances, I put out a call for you know, on Facebook or wherever, anyone who has collected any of David's dances, would you please send them to me? And so people from all over the country sent me dances that they were pretty sure David had written that they had written down. And then, I have you come across Gumby Kristen Falk?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes!

**Sue Songer**

So she wanted to help. And she took this huge mass of dances, and figured out, you know, eliminated all the duplicates. figured out which ones really were David's and David helped with that, too. So he, he only provided a small number of the dances, the bulk of them were provided by other people who'd who'd heard them.

**Julie Vallimont**

That's really cool.

**Sue Songer**

But he did guarantee that the everything that's in this book, he really did write.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Came out of his brain at some point, even if he didn't write it down. Yeah, you know, it's like, I didn't get to work with David nearly as much as some folks. But you know, the times I was on stage with him, and he's a caller, I just love that feeling of like, what should we do now and then he'll stop and think and then he'll raise this index finger to be like, "I've got it!" You know, just the thing for this moment. And that's not always a polished thing. Like sometimes, there are callers who will like plan their entire program out in advance so they can transition quickly from one to the next. And it's all very efficient. And he was sort of a person of the moment. But how many callers can have that repertoire of dances in their head and just have a database of hundreds of dances to choose from and then know the tunes and be able to play fiddle along with them and understand how they work together and be able to create so much fun for people...it's a special thing.

**Sue Songer**

Well, he was also a musician of the moment and one of the things that I liked, well, you mentioned my band Joyride earlier, that is a very rehearsed band, you know, not that everything is planned out but we know how we're going to transition between all the tunes then you know, we know what the endings are going to be like it's one that we have a lot of details worked out and and I enjoy that because it gives us a polished sound. With David there was rarely rehearsal or a setlist or anything and so it was all just winging it. And in fact we did we did a whole [Lady of the Lake](#) week without a setlist.

**Julie Vallimont**

Wow.

**Sue Songer**

And and so there there's something kind of exhilarating about that, too. Now, I'm sure it wasn't as polished as it could have been and probably wasn't even as good as it could have been if we rehearsed. But there's something, there's a certain energy you know, that comes from spontaneity and you know, maybe relief when oh, you know, wow we do know this tune after all this so it creates a kind of energy of its own and I enjoyed that. You know, it was sometimes a little nerve wracking. I always wanted to do well and you know, I hate fishing for chords, which it would sometimes put me in the position of but in all, I enjoyed it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I mean, most of us can't even keep our tune list in our heads like sometimes a a dance without a tune list on stage, I would just forget every tune I ever knew, I forget that I know them. You know, you need the tune list to remember, and just the fact that he could keep all that in his head and truly be spontaneous with it...it takes a lifetime to get to that place.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. Yeah. And sometimes when he could have done it differently, you know, with a little more preparation, I will never know. But I think that he, on purpose, didn't, because he enjoyed that that kind of seat of the pants aspect of it all. I think that that energized him to just kind of go with the moment. And so it's like, it's just like, hang on, you know, this is a David Kaynor gig.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right? It's its own animal. Yeah, and I'm not, you know, just to be clear, I'm not trying to say that one of these is like, better than the others, like, polish or not polish, that's not the point like there shouldn't even be a concept of "better," necessarily. They're just all different ways of doing it. And it's the wonderful diversity of our tradition. But when you talk about the homogenization of things, especially with dance weekends where people are traveling across the country, you get used to, this is the one way that it's done. Fancy bands with fancy arrangements and callers with brand new, frickin' complicated choreography and one walkthrough and if there's two walkthroughs, the dancers get mad. And then beginners don't always know how to fit in a dance weekend, you know? So I'm not trying to say one is better than the other, I like them all at different times,

**Sue Songer**

I do too and you know, brings me back to Joyride, which does, you know, we, there's a guitar player and me. So we, we coordinate our chords. We know how to follow each other if we veer off script. But we have agreed on, you know, a set of chords that we're going to use for each tune at least at one point, and it's, it's fun to, to really focus on the music and think of what we can do in transitions and, and other things, you know, to really push that end of it, which is the opposite end of spontaneity. But, but that's also rewarding when we can really focus on something and think about it and come up with something that's pleasing to us, and hopefully, to people dancing to us.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and, you know, it's not even necessarily less spontaneous, sometimes just a different kind of spontaneity, where I find that in a band, if you're all trying to flounder around to stare at each other for the transition, then you can't watch the dancers or watch the floor during that moment. Or you might be uneven as a band. And so, you know, if you, if you have those musical moments smoothed out, then you can be there for the dancers and guide them through that moment. And you can be spontaneous in that way of like playing off with them. It's hard to play off the dancers when you're not connected with them. So think there's a big difference between bands who are really arranged, but it's like a concert, and the dancers are irrelevant, you know, they're just there to make noise and ruin everyone's experience. Versus bands who have arrangements, but the arrangements actually also help the dance in some ways, too.

**Sue Songer**

That's our goal. You know, we're thinking of that's, that's our thought. Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's to serve the dance experience.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, we do put a lot of thought into that into, you know, what kind of mood do we want to create with this set? What's the ramp of the energy? What's the phrasing like? You know, are all these tunes going to work together? That that kind of thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

What is your favorite way to make a medley? What are some medley kind of ideas that you use?

**Sue Songer**

Well, I'll talk about the Megaband, because that's, because that kind of applies to everything and in the Megaband, I almost always start with the final tune. Most of the tunes are three-tuned, mostly medleys or three tune sets, a few two-tunes. So I'll have the final tune in mind, I also, for the Megaband, and this, I guess it's not really representative of how we do things in other bands. There's all this ground I need to cover, you know, different genres, different styles. That would pertain to any gig, you know, but you've, they have a larger list to choose from. For the Megaband, there's just the 11 sets that we're going to play. But I usually start with the end tune and think of the phrasing. Is it long phrased, short phrased, and then choose tunes with similar phrasing to, to build up to that end tune. And often that

means going to the same genre, like if we're ending with, I'll just throw out Edmond Parizeau, you know, which we've never done, well, the Megaband has never played Edmond Parizeau, but it could.

**Julie Vallimont**

Really?

**Sue Songer**

No, we never have.

**Julie Vallimont**

Why? How is that possible?

**Sue Songer**

I don't know. It's just never come up. So when I think of Edmond Parizeau, okay, you know, that has got the four count on the B part and the balance. So what other tunes are going to match that and have, you know, an energy in that same place? A part - longer phrases, B part, you know, more zippy. So I'm going to look at other Quebec tunes, probably, that have that that same structure. So that's, that's kind of how I think of things. And I don't have the final say on the Megaband sets, because I prepare many possibilities and then Betsy Branch and Eric Weberg and I meet, and we go over them all, and they toss out some of my choices. But I always have second choices, I never, I've rarely come up totally empty. But I have a large list of possibilities. And so I guess in, in any gig, you know, we're looking for variety in the same way Megaband does, it's just not as structured and planned in advance. Boy, talking about something pre-planned, you've got the Portland Megaband.

**Julie Vallimont**

You need to for that kind of thing. And you know, you have to have a conductor and stuff with that many people.

**Sue Songer**

We do, we have, I'm one conductor, and there's another conductor. We do a lot of things by signal. So it's not planned who's gonna play when, you know, the band members have to watch us to find out what's going to happen next. And so we might signal fiddles next time, or flutes next time or backup dropout or only percussion next time. Or if we give this signal that that means we're going to go into something that we have pre-arranged.

**Julie Vallimont**

So is that a V shape that you just made?

**Julie Vallimont**

For variation. Variations are all worked out in advance. So that means we're going to do the variation the next time around, which is something more fancy than just having a section coming around.

**Julie Vallimont**

Right. And people assume that they all know what variation means, you know, you know what the thing is, hopefully.

**Sue Songer**

You better! That's what we've been working on in rehearsals! So yeah, then but most of them do. And then even the variations are signaled, you know, once we get into them so that people know what to do.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, what repertoire do you draw on for your bands?

**Sue Songer**

Well...

**Julie Vallimont**

I ask the person who wrote the Portland Collection!

**Sue Songer**

Not necessarily the Portland Collections. Um, so in Joyride, oh, we like Flook a lot.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah!

**Sue Songer**

And so we got a couple people who are listening to Flook all the time, and they'll come back with ideas that they got from the Flook recordings or we had a [Crowfoot](#) stage...

**Julie Vallimont**

Everyone should have a Crowfoot stage!

**Sue Songer**

...where we were playing, you know, half of our setlist from Crowfoot. So I guess I'm listing modern composers. We've had several [Keith Murphy](#), we're still in Keith Murphy stage.

**Julie Vallimont**

Everyone should also have a Keith Murphy stage.

**Sue Songer**

So there's that, so people are listening to these people. There's Fiddle Tunes, which we haven't had now for two years in a row. So for me, I, Fiddle Tunes is the one thing that I have always gone to ever since my first year in the baby jammers room. I had to miss one year and I had a conflicting camp. Every other year I've been there that it's been on. And so I always come home with tunes that I've learned there either from staff members or from other musicians, you know, participants. So it would be rare that I didn't come back from Fiddle Tunes with a bunch of stuff I wanted to try out. So I would say rarely would we get anything just from sheet music in my bands. We don't have anyone who has

planned, I have another band too, The Stage Crew. And so, but no one in those bands is reading through books looking for tunes. They're they're all learning from people or recordings, or now YouTube. Or another source, a pandemic source, all these sessions that have popped up all over, you know, these Zoom sessions. A whole 'nother way to learn.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, it's a cool resource. Connect people who wouldn't get to meet in real life.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah so you know, just where wherever we can find something that we'd like.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Do you play a lot of New England tunes?

**Sue Songer**

You know, I'm almost at the end of your podcast with Karina. And you asked her that.

**Julie Vallimont**

I ask everybody that question.

**Sue Songer**

Not as many as they...we do play New England tunes. We, they're not the preponderance of what we play but Saratoga [Hornpipe], Dominion [Reel], all the chestnuts, my band plays you know, we can, I just think that that needs to be every contra musician's repertoire. If someone wants to do Petronella you know, you pull out to you pull out Petronella or Chorus Jig, and I enjoy playing those. I know the dancers don't always enjoy dancing them. But you know, that's, that's our roots for Pete's sake. And so I, oh Little Burnt Potato we play and I'd have to... Connaughtman's Rambles, that's in the New England Fiddler's Repertoire and Irishman's Heart to the Ladies. So yeah, we do and we like them.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, in there you've mentioned a jig originally from Cape Breton, a jig originally from Ireland, you know, a New England tune and that's the New England repertoire, right? It's like, some of these tunes maybe weren't written by New Englanders and some of them have just kicked around New England long enough that they're like New England traditional, and you know...

**Sue Songer**

Well when I think of the New England repertoire I do think of [Randy's \[Miller\]](#) book, you know, the [New England Fiddler's Repertoire](#), which, at one time, it was probably the main source of tunes played here in Portland. And you know, Reel de Montreal, stuff like that. So I would say, when I started dancing, oh, 75% of the tunes came from that. But it's, it's changed. There are more resources. But they're they're wonderful tunes. You know, they're really great dance tunes. They're fun to play. I like them.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, Randy is definitely on my list of people to talk with in this podcast, just waiting for the time to be right. But it's interesting, as another publisher of a book, I will look forward to what he has to say about the effects that that book had on the tune repertoire. You know, like, once you release a repertoire book, it also changes the repertoire. It's like that principle in science where you can't study something without affecting it at the same time [[Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle](#)]. You know, and it's just interesting how that, you know, goes back to that book as well. Yeah. I always ask people about New England tunes, because it's just such a fascinating concept to me, of this being a kind of New England tradition, although you know, it came from overseas and then like, nothing is really from anywhere after you trace it back far enough, right. And now it is spread throughout the country. And the tunes have changed a lot in the last 30, 40, 50 years. And I'm just interested in why and how and what is the value of some of these older things, and should we keep them around and why and all those kind of questions.

### **Sue Songer**

Well, I think it would be a shame to lose them. They're, you know, they're an important piece of this whole story. But I remember it was 1991 the first time that a group of more modern Quebec players came to Fiddle Tunes and [Richard Forest](#) was in it and I can't remember who the others are [Raynald Ouellett, Peirre Chartrand, and Benoit Legault]. But prior to that, the Quebec music had been along the lines of what you find in the New England Fiddler's Repertoire, you know was straightforward chords and these standard melodies. Well, they came and they just blew everyone's mind. You know, they were, it was a whole new thing that ended up kind of supplanting the older tunes. I remember I was sitting in, at Fiddle Tunes, a workshop and I won't say who was teaching although I do remember, but it was a room full of people and right across the hall Richard Forest was teaching Reel St. Antoine and none of us had ever heard it before. And all of us this one workshop, you know we were leaning over to the other room like, what's going on over there? And it would seem so exciting to hear and it was you know, everybody was just drawn to this. It was almost like this point of divide in the northwest between the old and the new at least when it came to Quebec.

### **Julie Vallimont**

That's so interesting, because now Reel St. Antoine is like, practically a chestnut, you know, it's like one of those like, open band tunes that everybody can wail away on. And it's great. And everybody knows it.

### **Sue Songer**

It's true.

### **Julie Vallimont**

How quickly things change!

### **Sue Songer**

Well it was 1991. And I remember everybody's, you know, just being totally entranced by that tune, and you gotta play it. And kind of this new sound...

### **Julie Vallimont**

I think that the Quebecois music scene is a great example. You know, of course, I'm not an expert in that, you know, but, but like, the flourishing of different types of tunes, and a lot of influence from Irish tunes, and more people playing DADGAD guitar as opposed to like traditional piano accompaniment, and the tunes are flashier, and more nuanced and different kinds of chords. It's like a lot of what we've seen happening with contra music, the musicianship just taken to this whole other level and bands like La Bottine Souriante, and like other bands, just like kind of reinventing it. And yet, there are a lot of people who also love the old traditional tunes and are trying to hang on to them. And I love like, you know, like in the contra world, we're lucky to have had bands like [Tidal Wave](#) and [Genticorum](#). And, you know, talking to, you know, Pascal [Gemme] and Yann [Falquet] from Genticorum, and they love talking about the old tunes, they call them glorious tunes instead of dorky tunes, which I love. You know, and it's that thing, there's room for everything, right? For the old and the new. As long as we have that respect, as long as we don't forget about them. But I think it's easy to dismiss these old tunes as not as flashy. But I just feel for a lot of us, the longer we play, the more we realize the essence of what is there. And there's a lot of good stuff there.

**Sue Songer**

I totally agree. Very content when I play those tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

So do you have any thoughts about the future of where the contra dance music is headed, or..

**Sue Songer**

Oh, that was on your list of questions, I remember?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yes.

**Sue Songer**

So I got as far as "Do I have any thoughts about that?" I, I wonder if the pandemic is going to have changed things. I think it's a little less easy to predict at the moment. But I don't know if that's just a momentary thing. Or if it's going to be a permanent thing. I would expect it to continue kind of along the same trajectory of, you know, more national interplay, I guess you would say, you know, more national connection, just because of all the opportunities there are to connect. I think that will go on. I think it's not really a change in the music. But I think that people have learned how to take advantage of digital learning, you know, Zoom type learning, and that could have an effect that we can't really foresee. I've heard musicians say, "Gosh, do I really want to travel? It's been kind of nice, you know, not...to be more rooted at home. Do I really want to get back on that, you know, treadmill?" And then there are the other side of people saying, "Wow, I can't hardly wait to get back on and go. I hope it thrives. You know, social dance is such a wonderful thing. If it would be terrific, if it became more widespread. I'd love to see it taught in public schools, you know, not not just taught as an oddity, you know, something that you have to put up with every quarter in PE or something like that. But if it could, I mean, it's, it's such a healthy, joyful thing. And if more people could do it, either playing the music or dancing to it, or just, you know, kind of getting involved in, it would be a really good thing. I don't know if it'll happen.

**Julie Vallimont**

I think that's a good point because in the last 30 years, we've had this huge flourishing of contra dance music, you know, even in like the number of tunes that were submitted to your Portland Collections, like the first book did not get all the tunes. You had more submissions for every subsequent book.

**Sue Songer**

We did, yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

And yet, despite this incredible flourishing in terms of creativity and variety, most Americans have not even heard of this, like people go through their whole lives and never hear about this art form, folk form at all.

**Sue Songer**

And it's very hard to explain to someone what you do, you know what...Yeah, because it's, it's just unknown. I think that, I don't know about this, for sure but I suspect that more people are writing tunes now, than before. Maybe it's just because more, I think more people are playing tunes. I don't know. But that's my guess. At least it's, more people are...we know about more people who are playing tunes than we used to, we can put it that way. But I think people are, you know, they're motivated and inspired by other composers that they, they see, you know, they want to do it too. So I think that's a change. I think repertoires have broadened. Of course, there's the whole electronic aspect, you know, which probably will continue.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah it's like a fun side branch. At least with me, that was always my intention for it to be, you know, I don't think of any of these things as a linear evolution, and also evolution isn't linear. You know, like, we mistake the meaning of evolution as thinking of it as a linear progression towards something better. That's not how evolution works. You know, just a little branch, a fun little side branch to explore. But you know, whatever we do, we keep coming back to the tunes, because that's the thing that holds it all together.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, I know that I haven't had much opportunity to play in person, you know, nobody has. But I was at, you know during this little window, when it seemed to be safe to get out I did go to a rather large session, and it was just so satisfying to sit down and play really basic tunes.

**Julie Vallimont**

I'd be so curious to have another version of the Portland collections in like 30 years, don't worry, you don't have to write it, but like, you know, like, what will it be in 30 years? Are these tunes that we all think of like Reel St. Antoine? And, you know, these Little Burnt Potato or these tunes still gonna be the ubiquitous ones we think of them? Because, you know, when I talked to people who were playing 30 years ago, the tunes they list, a lot of them feel like "Wait, you don't know this tune? You don't know that tune?" It changes quickly. And so I wish we could fast forward and see what the repertoire would look like in the future...

**Sue Songer**

Who will stand the test of time?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, exactly. What would that tunebook look like? The Portland Collection Volume 12. What will be in it?

**Sue Songer**

Well, one of my life tasks is finding a way to make sure the Portland Collections get preserved in some form. My kids don't want to deal with it.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, thankfully, we have organizations like [CDSS](#) and other libraries and things. Is that how you're going to do it? Also, you can just put it all over YouTube now. Isn't that how everybody preserves everything these days?

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, I don't know how I'm gonna do it. I'm, I'm thinking about it. But I haven't come to any conclusions.

**Julie Vallimont**

That'd be fun to make a contra dance music time capsule.

**Sue Songer**

It would, wouldn't it?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, and put it away. And then 50 or 100 years later...

**Sue Songer**

Oh, my gosh yeah, take it to Nelson, you know?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, exactly. Put it under their renewed same old floor that they rebuilt the same way that it used to be and stick it under the floorboards and then next time, they have to redo their floor and keep the slant in it, they can dig up the time capsule...

**Sue Songer**

That would be great.

**Julie Vallimont**

That would be so cool. It's been so much fun to talk with you. Is there anything else that you want to get to while we're talking today?

**Sue Songer**

I feel like I've talked so much. Where's your list of questions. I don't think so. I mean, I can't think of anything else I have to say. Let's see here, um, oh goodness, well, here's one thing. I don't know how you'll fit this in. What are my favorite moments?

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, I'd love to hear some favorite moments.

**Sue Songer**

It's all gonna be the same favorite moment. And that is when everything is totally in sync at a dance. And it's not a one time thing. But when there's this, really kind of almost a visceral connection between the dancers and the caller and the music and everybody is just in the same space and you can feel it in the footfalls you know, and you can feel it in the music and if the caller is still calling, which they probably aren't at that point, but they're, they're facilitating. It's when, when the dance reaches that point where there's just the synchronicity between us and them. That's my favorite moment. And it can be anywhere at any time. It can be in a small hall, at a community dance, or it can be at, you know, some weekend. It doesn't matter. It's the same feeling. So that's, that's my favorite moment.

**Julie Vallimont**

I love that. That's the same thing that inspired me to do it.

**Sue Songer**

Really?

**Julie Vallimont**

Oh yeah. There's just nothing like that moment.

**Sue Songer**

Wow. Like, inspired you as...did you start out as a dancer or a musician?

**Julie Vallimont**

I was a dancer first. Yeah, one of my friends brought me along. And I was like, "What is this thing?" And of course you don't experience that your first few times doing a dance, but then at some point, you get into it enough and you're like, "Whoa!"

**Sue Songer**

Yeah.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's just what is this thing? And sometimes the nights when it clicks with the band, and the caller and the dancers, and then I was like, "Oh, I want to do this." It was like a whole different activity to me than it had been before. You know, while I was just learning.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah, you came into it with with a lot of piano skills already.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah but unrelated piano skills. I had a lot to learn. Yeah, but it was, like that moment. I remember that moment for me of that first moment of synchronicity, like you talk about, and that being like, "Oh, I want to devote myself to this. I want to learn more about it. I want to experience it."

**Sue Songer**

Yeah. I guess you know, people talk about the dancers high and all that and it might be that, but it might be something else. I'm not sure. You know, everyone probably experiences that kind of thing a little bit differently.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah, there's the musician's high too.

**Sue Songer**

Yes.

**Julie Vallimont**

Which is great. I mean, some musicians are, but that's a separate question. But the flow state that we all get, like, your brain just gets to this different place when you're locked in with people playing music together.

**Sue Songer**

Yeah it does.

**Julie Vallimont**

It's incredible.

**Sue Songer**

It's the best. I really like it. And it's a you know, it's a group thing, a team thing.

**Julie Vallimont**

Yeah. Yeah, having that amazing moment and sharing it with people is the best. Well, it has been so wonderful to talk with you and hear your perspective on so many different things and just get to know you a little bit. I really appreciate it.

**Sue Songer**

Well I've enjoyed it as well, and the chance to get to know you, to meet you kind of in person like this.

**Julie Vallimont**

Well, thank you so much, Sue. It's been really wonderful.

**Sue Songer**

Thank you. I am just delighted to have had this chance to meet you and talk with you and share our experiences as piano players and musicians. It's been really fun.

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