

Contra Pulse Episode 37 – Ben Smith

Julie Vallimont

This episode, Julie sits down with fiddler, multi-instrumentalist, and composer Ben Smith. Ben wears multiple hats in life, not only as one third of the Mean Lids, his main trio, but also as a computer graphics artist, software designer, teacher, and researcher at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis. During this interview we'll also get to meet his musical alter-ego, D.R. Shadow, an electro-contra music act.

Julie Vallimont

Ben and Julie's conversation touches on his early musical experiences in upstate New York with classical violin and the magical moment when he first played for a contra dance. They discuss his move from New York to the Midwest where he discovered new musical horizons and eventually met his Mean Lid bandmates. And for the first time on Contra Pulse, Julie gets to take a deep dive into the world of techno contra, exploring with Ben the intricacies of incorporating electronic dance music and other alternative musical forms into the realm of contra dance through his D.R. Shadow project.

Julie Vallimont

Hello, Ben Smith, and welcome to Contra Pulse.

Ben Smith

Hey Julie. It is a pleasure to be here.

Julie Vallimont

It's been so long since I've seen you I don't know where it was, maybe at CDH [[Contra Dancers Holiday](#)]?

Ben Smith

It was probably [Flurry 2020](#).

Julie Vallimont

Flurry. Oh, right. The last thing we all did.

Ben Smith

I know, it was our super spreader contra event.

Julie Vallimont

Always spread with love though, then.

Ben Smith

And music, such good memories.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that's right. You were there with the [Mean Lids](#) and if I could go back then maybe I would have just hugged everybody 800 extra times.

Ben Smith

Yeah, I think the last session we played we could have just cancelled it and just had a hug down the line.

Julie Vallimont

Man, Flurry 2020. Well, we're talking to you now. Are you at your home in Indianapolis?

Ben Smith

Yeah and you can't see it but it's a beautiful sunny day and we might be hearing the wind chimes that are back out of the kitchen door.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, that's charming. Yeah, it's been kind of this unseasonably warm fall even here in Brattleboro. It's mid October. It was 75 degrees yesterday.

Ben Smith

That's very unseasonable.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's kind of beautiful. But I'm just curious to catch up. What have you been up to without contra dance music, what kind of things have you been doing?

Ben Smith

So actually, I have been kind of on a year-long challenge to write. I write a lot of music, write a lot of my own tunes and I used to write primarily contra dance music so...be writing tunes that were AABB or could be coerced into that format and were intended to be played at about dance tempo, 112, 120 beats per minute. And then also doing my [DR Shadow](#) electronic stuff also all geared towards contra dances and waltzes, and supporting those live shows. But once the pandemic lockdowns happened and all of our calendars got cleared I could not find it in myself to write more contra dance music because I was so sad that no one would be dancing to it. So for probably for, well actually I know it was 184 days that I did not write any music from when we got the news that we had to stay home. It was heartbreaking. But then I came out of that with this like...I set myself this challenge that I would only write music that was not for contra dancing. So you could dance to it, you know I can dance in my kitchen to it, but specifically not contra dance music. So I started writing a lot of really slow things like 84 beats per minute and tunes that I really, very intentionally are meant to be played slowly, very, very simple tunes. And for a little while I had a challenge, like write one tune every day and record it in my kitchen and that lasted for about 12 days that I was pretty proud of. So I've been doing that and then also on the electronic side I have just been, for years and years, have really loved the slow chill, trip hop style of electronic dance music. Just now recently in like last couple of months really trying to get my head into that space and figuring out how to mesh that with the tones and the spirit of what I think of as like, back porch music. You know the things that you and I would sit on our porch and play you

know, I play my banjo and we'd play like our tunes. And how can I weave in the like, very expansive sense of tonality that is in trip hop music. Actually the tempos of trip hop often are kind of fast, but they're so spacious that they feel slow. Anyway, I'm trying to mix in a slow trip hop with my slow banjo tunes. That's like what I've been up to.

Julie Vallimont

That sounds really fun. I want to come hang out on your back porch.

Ben Smith

Oh, you're more than welcome to, or I'll come up to Brattleboro.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, seems like a super groovy place. It's interesting that you talk about slow tempos because a lot of people I've talked to, I feel like we've all been gravitating in that direction. I've been working on doing a project with slower tempo tunes and I was talking to Sam Bartlett...it's just so funny like a lot of us, our favorite tempo is in the 80s to 90s. We love dance music and that's a walking tempo and it needs to be faster, but it is fun to get to explore these things that aren't dance tempo, they just do different things to your brain.

Ben Smith

They do. In my case, it's often like, I find myself kind of like having to rein myself in, like I start, you know, you do a lot of recording, so I'll start a recording, I hate to play with a click track so I'll start out, count out various...get a real strong feeling of what 84 is, and play along in a minute I'm all the way up to like 100. It's just so hard to, so it's like a meditation almost to like have to play a tune and just hold it at that slow more relaxed speed.

Julie Vallimont

You have to internalize that tempo in a whole different way. It's almost like dancing with the tune in a sense at that speed, you have to hold it in your body as you play and be relaxed or else you'll speed up.

Ben Smith

Yup, exactly.

Julie Vallimont

That's fun. So for our listeners, the main band that a lot of us have heard you in is the Mean Lids and I think you guys go back a good decade plus now at this point right? Your first album came out in like 2010?

Ben Smith

Yeah, we recorded in 2009.

Julie Vallimont

Wow. Do you still see them?

Ben Smith

I do yeah, we're gonna be playing, so I don't know when this is coming out but next Friday so like in seven days, Urbana, Illinois has a annual what they call [Folk and Roots Festival](#) where they get a lot of acts from across the country to come and play but we're one of the homegrown ones so we're playing Friday at 4:00, kind of like kick off the stage set.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, you have a gig!

Ben Smith

Oh yeah, we have one.

Julie Vallimont

So many bands are kind of separated right now so I'm glad you still get to see each other. That's the advantage of having a band where you all kind of live in the same part of the country, not all bands are that lucky.

Ben Smith

We should talk about this, but the traveling nature of contra dance is something that I think about more and more especially since I can't do it right now but how our contra dance community is, it's like there's so many of these what we call traveling gypsies. I went to so many dances in the last five years all across the country to play and to dance and I know people from all over the place and it just was sort of like natural that we would all be distributed across the country and and be this really diverse distributed community. And then once you take away travel, what do we do? We have to do things like this, like Contra Pulse.

Julie Vallimont

I know it's so funny, I felt like my whole network of friends and people I know is scattered all over the country but it felt like this giant net that I could climb across across the country. I always felt like somebody would catch me wherever I was. I always knew somebody or was connected to something and it is bizarre to feel cut off from that and we all respond to that in different ways. Some of us hunker down at home. Noah has been just driving all over the country anyway, visiting people because he misses them all, without even gigs to do it. It is interesting, I think I've been to your house once and you've been to my house once and yet we've known each other for years and gotten to know each other and it's just all through these events and traveling and chatting and talking shop backstage at 1:00 am or whatever. It's fun, it's a community but, you know, how real is it if COVID happens and it disappears...but it's real!

Ben Smith

Oh it's not gone.

Julie Vallimont

Exactly, it's not gone.

Ben Smith

I was walking in the woods today because it's beautiful and I'm thinking we're very much like a phoenix, there's got to be a point when you got to go back to the egg and and then wait for the right temperature, it has to be 2000 degrees or something for the phoenix to hatch out of the egg. I don't know, but anyways, contra dance is just dormant right now, we're coming back, it's gonna explode like a fire.

Julie Vallimont

I'm really curious to see how it's gonna change, which maybe we'll talk about a little bit later. But before I get ahead of myself, why don't we start from the beginning. Speaking of eggs, what temperature did you hatch at? I'd love to hear a little bit about like, how you ended up playing fiddle and the traditional music scene in the Midwest and kind of where you cut your teeth and how you ended up playing for contra dances.

Ben Smith

So it's kind of like, I moved around a lot. My parents moved quite a bit when I was little. I got a fiddle when I was four or three or something, either my parents or my grandparents gave one to me. I would get it out every year they tell me and they take pictures of this. And I would pick it up and see if I could play it as a three year old and put it back in its case and be like no, we'll try again next year. So I did that every year until I was nine and then my parents got me fiddle or violin lessons. So I started as Suzuki trained, so for those of you who don't know, it's like a lot of by ear, you don't learn to read music for years which set me up great for going into fiddle music. The reason that I started playing fiddle music well actually I'm just remembering this right now, my mom always wanted to have a fiddle player in the family, not a violinist, she wanted a fiddle player. But as a little kid I wanted to be a violinist. So Ken Burns' Civil War comes out and for like a birthday present to my mom, we video recorded like the third episode, which has the Ungar band, footage of them actually playing it. I would just play that little section over and over and over again when mom was not in the house so that I could learn Ashokan Farewell and I played it for her and she cried and it was awesome. Then I didn't play fiddle music for years after that for real. I grew up in Alabama, this is all around Huntsville area. And then as a 15 year old, we moved to upstate New York. For anybody out there who has a 15 year old and is thinking about doing that, don't. It's not good for a 15 year old's psyche to be transplanted from their friend group. Especially this was like pre internet so there's no way to stay in touch with my friends. I miss them still to this day. So, moved up there and so I'd been in a youth orchestra, moved up there, there was no real youth orchestra that satisfied my social music needs as a teenager the way that the Alabama scene had been. So some friends of the family just put together a contra dance in Perry City, New York. I don't know, Julie, if you ever made it over there, it's near Trumansburg, south of Interlaken.

Julie Vallimont

Oh no, I grew up in the part of upstate that was Rochester area, western upstate New York.

Ben Smith

So it's just a little tiny town but it had an old Quaker meeting house and they put on a family contra dance there and roped in all the kids that they knew that also played so I got on stage with my sister and I remember there's another girl playing fiddle. I'd never played fiddle music, but they said it's okay, we have notes and I read so they were like here just play these tunes. That was a transformative

moment that came at just the time in my life when I desperately needed social interaction. And here were these adults that took me under their wing and they were just very casual and loving and friendly and all the best things about contra experience. The other part of it is, as a teenager playing classical music, I had the worst case of nerves. Twice a year we had to play a solo piece at a recital with all the other people in the studio and all the parents listening and right around then I just had a total bomb of a piece. I got up and played this piece and got halfway through and my mind just completely went blank and I had no idea where I was and what note I was supposed to put where I was in the piece and the accompanist tried to help me, it was just terrible. It's like the worst stage fright inducing outcome that you could ever possibly imagine. I went and played this contra dance and like, there was no nerves at all, it was just fun. And so if I realize this now, it was like the participatory nature of that where the caller and all the dancers, everybody's invested in it being a really really good outcome. Like we all have fun when we all participate and we and the dancers are laughing and making mistakes. It was a family dance, lots of little kids are making mistakes and so we did like four of those and then they invited me to come down to the open dances on the Ithaca Commons, the Monday night dances, so shout out to the Monday night crew down there. I would go and play there every Monday for like three years and rope in my sisters. We lived way out in the country, so pile my sisters in the van, I had my learner's permit, so we go down Mondays, play there, play the first half of that dance and then have to go back home. That was a start and then I was like okay, I'm gonna play fiddle and then I was like, wait these people are playing banjo, I'm gonna play banjo and then one guy came with a mandolin, I was like, what is that? I actually tried to make a mandolin because I couldn't afford to buy one. That was the right time and right place and I was just became obsessed. I loved it all.

Julie Vallimont

I didn't realize that you spent time in Ithaca. That's interesting.

Ben Smith

In fact, it may have been around the same time that you were up in there.

Julie Vallimont

Well, that's what I was wondering, we were so close to each other and never ran into each other. I didn't even know contra dancing existed when I lived in Ithaca, which is a real shame because of course is a wonderful scene full of wonderful folks. And you know, there's dances in town, there's dances at Cornell, there's various things, and I didn't know about any of it. Wow. So I'm glad that fiddling came along at that time in your life and that it kind of took hold for you. It's also interesting, I wonder how many other people had that experience of like their first fiddle tune being [Ashokan Farewell](#) because of the Ken Burns movies.

Ben Smith

Kind of a cliché I think.

Julie Vallimont

But I think it's true. I think it's like the gateway tune for a lot of people who are into fiddle music.

Ben Smith

Especially from coming over from the classical world. I think that that tune, it's accessible enough that I, I'd been playing for three years, I could play all the notes. And it was the right number of notes that made me feel like I was doing a great job. It has a pretty wide range, right? But as an intermediate musician you can play it all, lots of good chords. It's a tune that brings chills to people, like really legitimately it brings chills to me. So yeah, it's like one of those sort of quintessentially great tunes.

Julie Vallimont

[Jay Ungar](#)'s tunes, his waltzes and things, they just have that like really heartfelt-ness to them. That melody is just soaring, it's classic. So what were your mentors as you were learning to play fiddle and banjo like who were you learning from who were you inspired by once you decided you wanted to do this?

Ben Smith

So mentor...a woman Marty Blodgett in Ithaca, New York, who just played fiddle and she was the one who called up my mom and was like, "I hear Ben plays violin can he come play fiddle with us?" We played for years and years and had like, four different bands and played dances and we played restaurants and played at family picnics and just wherever. Also, she like took me to things, so she got me to my first Flurry, got me to Old Songs. I'm trying to remember what else, oh, the first time I got to dance to Wild Asparagus in Rochester in 1997. I remember it being, I'm sure people in Rochester will know what space this was, but like a sort of basement like under a church kind of thing, all white with these columns and one of those awkward, like there's columns in the dance floor kind of spaces I just remember it being totally packed. I tried to dance a couple dances and then I just stood next to the stage and watched them and specifically watching [Becky Tracy](#) playing for this floor and I was so impressed that she's playing immaculately and then just like moving around like kicking her feet out in different directions, stretching. I was like, how is she moving so much and then still just playing like all this awesome music. So one of my sort of heroes, people that I want to emulate. But other than that it was like a lot of recordings, so we lived way out in the country and I just tried to get every recording I could get my hands on. I was listening to Scottish, like [Alasdair Fraser](#), Irish players, [Martin Hayes](#), old time bluegrass, listened to a lot of bluegrass music and once I got to college I seriously dove into the bluegrass world and kind of left contra behind for a while before coming back to it. We had our first personal computer and I was able to turn on the recording on the computer, turn up the record player and then capture that tune on the computer and then we had the software where you could slow it down by half so I spent hours and hours and hours listening to all these fiddle tunes an octave down and trying to figure out how to how to play them all which later then set me up for a great career in music technology and recording.

Julie Vallimont

I guess they didn't have software yet that would pitch shift it, like preserve the pitch as you slowed it down? So you had to do it exactly half or else it will not be something you could play along with easily.

Ben Smith

The other alternative was to take 45s and then play them at the 33 RPM but I don't actually remember now what that pitch shift was. I used that to try and transcribe it so that I could just then read it from the

notes but yeah, all those things we used to have to do to try and figure out how to learn these tunes. We couldn't just get them off the internet, there was no like session site or anything.

Julie Vallimont

It's amazing how technology has changed the way we all learn and share tunes. We take it for granted, we don't even think about it anymore. Of course a lot of us love learning tunes from people in person, to me that's my favorite way to do it but we don't have to, there's all these other ways to do it too so it's just great. You mentioned Trumansburg and I spaced on it but of course I know where Trumansburg is, it's right outside Ithaca. I got several speeding tickets there when I was in college at Cornell so I remember that town very well.

Ben Smith

Yep, I've been pulled over there.

Julie Vallimont

You come across the town line it's 30, you don't notice, doesn't take much. Maybe I blocked it out of my memory. So how did you end up in the Midwest and become a part of the Midwest dance and music scene?

Ben Smith

So yeah, moved to the Midwest, so after after being in the in the Finger Lakes area, doing the contra dance stuff there, I went to college at Ithaca College, got a bachelor's in music.

Julie Vallimont

Ben, I'm sorry I don't want to interrupt you but we were there at the same time , this is driving me crazy.

Ben Smith

But you were on the other hill, I never went over there.

Julie Vallimont

No, we didn't yeah, we...none of us left campus most of the time except to go to downtown in the middle but we would never have met each other. I don't think I went to IC campus once in the six years I lived in Ithaca which is so dumb but I didn't have a car, I rode my bike everywhere. So anyway, so funny.

Ben Smith

When I went to college, I kind of just fell headlong into my program, loved it. Like, invested all my time there and didn't have time for contra dancing anymore. My musical outlet outside of school, I played in the opera and I played in the symphony and I played in the chamber orchestra and I played in string quartets and I giggered for weddings and things like that. I also formed with a bunch of buddies a bluegrass band. Ithaca people from the like around 2000 they remember Cletus and the Barn Burners, woot, woot. We played that and tried to do the bluegrass thing, went to the [IBMA conference](#) and traveled around and it was super fun. But that kind of then came to take up a huge amount of time and it wasn't enough money to live on. So I got a job as a software engineer in Ithaca, did that for two years

before figuring out I really can't sit behind a desk, like that's not my life. I love music, I've got to find a way to make music my career. While I was working as a software engineer, put together grad school applications and because I was dead set on going to school for electronic music composition. I did apply to a bunch of schools, [University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign](#) had this dream program for me, got accepted. The hardest part for me was leaving upstate New York, and especially leaving the folk music scene there because I was playing with the old the old time crew there. I finally figured out how to play clawhammer banjo thanks to Richie Stearns, I managed to get some lessons with him. I had also learned, taught myself, like hot club swing style, transcribed a whole bunch of Stephane Grappelli and Joe Venuti and all those guys, and was playing in that scene. I was like, there is no way and my apologies Midwestern listeners, but just you have to know this is what people in New York often do think about you is, like, there's no way the music scene out there is that good. There's not going to be anybody like, I'm gonna be the only fiddle player. There's not going to be anybody who plays swing or, like, what is even old time? Do they have old time music in Illinois? I don't know.

Julie Vallimont

Spoiler alert. They do.

Ben Smith

Turns out they do. So I moved out there thinking I was gonna end up in this vacuum of culture. It turned out that the place is just like, I don't even...I'm really heavy into foraging and mushrooms and stuff and so I would now say in a really, really positive way that the Midwest is like these mushrooms of folk music just like come up everywhere. They're so beautiful and delicious. Maybe that metaphor doesn't go that far. But yeah, there's so much music. I'm sure, I mean, the music in upstate New York is awesome and innovative too. But the Midwest music I felt, for me, was like refreshingly different, and incorporating and like more, I don't know, I felt it was very porous, and a lot of crossover musicians who were playing zydeco and playing old time. And then there I've met some people who played hot club swing, and I was like, yes, do you need a fiddle player? And they're like, we've been wanting a fiddle player. And then, like world beat music and African bands, and Afro pop bands, and it's just like so much stuff. Then I realized that Urbana is really well situated to catch a lot of artists that were touring across the country and either had a gig in Chicago the night before or after, and would swing through, because it's only like two and a half hours from Chicago. So anyways, really good. You know, lots of music coming all over the place. I've just met so many amazing people. I now only live two hours away. As I said, I'm going back there next weekend, to participate in their Folk Festival, which is going to be awesome. Yeah, but anyway I came out here for grad school, lots of trepidation turned out to be an amazing thing and yeah, I haven't left.

Julie Vallimont

Wow. And then you ended up meeting Miriam Larson and Matt Turino. Matt has been in that music scene for a long time playing with his dad Tom Turino. And so how did you end up forming the Mean Lids and start playing for contra dances out there?

Ben Smith

Yeah, so actually it does kind of come through Tom. He was a professor in the music department that I was in, he was professor of ethnomusicology, which is on the fourth floor. I was a doctoral student in

the composition program, which is on the fifth floor and there's only one elevator, maybe there's two. It felt like there's only one. So one day I get in the elevator and he's there and he says, "Are you are you Ben?" I'm like, "Yes." He's like "I'm Tom." I'm like, okay. He says, "I have a zydecdo band and I need a fiddle player, do you play Zydeco?" I was like, "No, but I will". So what had happened is it turned out that his son Matt had been the fiddle player in a Zydeco band for a long time and he had just left, moved to Asheville, for school, and I had just moved to town. So Matt leaves, like the week that I arrive. So then I get conscripted into the zydeco band. And that the band Big Grove Zydeco was just so much fun, some of my best memories of playing on stages. I became the fiddle player that played, I don't remember now how many years we played, probably like five or six years that band kept going. During that time, Matt eventually moved back to Urbana, and now he didn't want to be a fiddle player. He wanted to be the rub board player, the washboard player so he played washboard and I played fiddle. We got to know each other...hanging out a lot through that. Then at one point, kind of like one of these backstage conversations he starts talking about contra dance music. I haven't been playing it for a while. I was like, contra dance! I love contra dance music. Oh also at the time in Urbana almost all the contra dance music in the bands were very very much old time bands there was no New England style music in town that was playing for contra dances. So Matt said, "You know what we need to do to spice this up a little bit is to form a more New England style band." He's like, "Ben you can play like that Irish stuff?" and I was like yeah, I do, I do. Between all of that I lived for eight months in Ireland and spent a lot of time in pubs and drank a lot of Guinness so I felt competent playing Irish music. So we formed a duo. So he and I formed a duo, we were...this is for all posterity, right? So now if I say it you're going to remember it, or be able to look it up! Anyways our band was called the Prairie Chicken Asylum. We were just a duo and we had so much fun doing it and were received well that we started traveling around. We played all the regional dances, like we can play Monday night St. Louis and Tuesday night Indianapolis and Chicago also on a Monday, so we played a bunch of those, did like two or three hour drives. And that was that was fun. But you know how it is playing in a duo, you have to be on, I mean if you're on the stage, you should be on all the time. But with two people there's really no rest. There's no like here I'll just kick back and let you guys take it. Because there's only one other person. You can do that sometimes but we were primarily guitar and fiddle and then our other lineup was Matt would play fiddle and I would play baritone fiddle. So we always have one high and one low instrument, like one lead and one rhythm. There's only so much you can do with just a rhythm solo, which I do love but it only lasts for like a couple times through the dance. So we were like, we need a third person. And we need another primary melody but somebody who can like hang with our like, you have to be able to fill all the roles. Matt and Miriam, this would be their story for another interview, but they'd known each other and been playing music together since they were little, they grew up together in Urbana. As kids the fun sort of things that they would do is try to learn a Norwegian tune off a recording and then try and play it together. So she came back from college, after we'd been a band together for a year. The first time I played with her was at this big event out here in the Midwest, Sugar Hill which is like down south of Bloomington, Indiana. Amazing festival, contra dance, like contra dance weekend camp. It's one of the ones where you sign up for a slot, so we signed up for like 1am on Saturday night and we were like okay, Miriam, you gotta play with us so she sat in with us and then we were like okay, you're coming back from college, you're gonna be in our band and then we had to come up with a new name so, Mean Lids.

Julie Vallimont

Now you have to wear hats every time you play together.

Ben Smith

We do.

Julie Vallimont

Good thing you like hats.

Ben Smith

Yep. We all liked hats so that was why we felt comfortable. In fact, so brief story of the name because you're going to ask is we all wore hats to all of our gigs and one of our friends who came to all of them, he's like, you're wearing hats all the time, we tried several different names. He was like, he was always wearing like really dapper kind of clothes, always wore nice shoes, that kind of stuff. He was like, "You should be called Mean Lids because you always wear hats and they're very snappy." And we were like, "Okay, we'll try it." So we like put that on the next time we played a contra dance and then it never changed.

Julie Vallimont

So the Mean Lids, as you guys sort of came into your own as a band, one of the things you became known for was having a lot of original repertoire, and you have a stack of CDs, all with a lot of original tunes on them. But when you first started playing together, what was your repertoire when you started and how did it evolve?

Ben Smith

So as I alluded to already what we felt was our mandate was to play what we considered New England style contra dance, which we were later told is not New England at all, but whatever. So we intentionally did not pick old time string band style tunes. I did not play banjo in the beginning. And so, off for first album, I'm blanking on the names of them, it was a long time ago. We played like Ships are Sailing. These like contra dance style tunes...well, and we had the Portland books, like, doesn't everybody? So we were picking reels and jigs out of that, at the beginning would weave in some things like Rambling Pitchfork jig was one I remember, we don't play it anymore. But I was always trying to get us to play it. Gallagher's Frolics, a bunch of the frolics, 'Flowers of things?' You know, one of those flowers tunes?

Julie Vallimont

Flowers of Edinburgh, there's a lot of different flowers.

Ben Smith

Yeah, so we were playing but Matt, he didn't know how to, he didn't play any kind of your like, New England, sort of contra dance style guitar playing. He was very much figuring it out on his own. Can we talk about how he does his feet? Let's talk about that.

Julie Vallimont

Yes, I literally was just thinking about his backwards feet.

Ben Smith

Let's geek out on this. So as it's, it's something and Matt, I love you dearly, dearly. And this is actually an awesome part, I realized it's like one of our superpowers later. So Matt didn't learn how to do the feet from other people. He just learned from watching some YouTube videos and listening to it. And he had a background in straight up clogging, like stand up southern hard sole clogging. So instead of doing the standard, right heel and then toe, toe which, is what we mostly do in the more like, I guess coming from the Maine, French Canadian style. So heel, toe, toe, he did heel, right heel, and then left foot, heel, toe. So it's heel, heel, toe, heel, heel, toe. Which, sonically you hear, you know, like the Nightingale feet track it's so clean and very precise but it has this very, very sort of higher kind of pitch to it. I look at the waveform in the recording and the toe sounds are really clean like tap tap on the wood. Whereas if you have two heels, especially from a big guy like Matt, those are boom, boom. So on the on the offbeat, instead of getting that toe, toe you get heel, toe. So like I'm all into the electronic music so it's much more like having a kick and then snare hat instead of kick and two hats. So it's a very different sound but that is now the Mean Lids sound.

Julie Vallimont

That's fantastic. I think it fits really well with your groove because I think of you as ultimately a groove band. And of course, you can think of yourself however you like but that's how I think of you. You're tune based, you play tunes and you play the heck out of the tune, like you'll play the same tune for 10 minutes, sometimes, it seems. This is my uninformed take from the dance floor. They have like a real arc to them often, like you'll build up and then they'll pull back and then you'll build or you'll just keep building like the entire time for 10 minutes straight, and there's no fancy tricks. Somehow that foot style, it just all fits with the groove and the vibe. You're vibey, you guys are vibey, you have a vibe.

Ben Smith

That was one of our things from beginning and we'd all continually talk about this, we used to in the car all the time, but now we don't have a car to travel, we have cars, we just don't have gigs to travel to. But we continually check in with each other on what is it that we really want to create in our music and in the dance floor and we would talk a lot about which bands and which experiences really meant something to us in the contra dance world. And then who do we really want to emulate? Or is there one track of an artist that we all loved, oftentimes not even a contra dance band, but just something that resonated with all of us, and that we really wanted to figure out how to do in our music, learn from who we consider the greats. We would come back again and again to that really trancy feeling of, in the dance, of like, being transported, and feeling like that everybody on the floor, all moving together, and the music that makes that happen. When that's really happening on the floor what is happening in the music? Can we, as much as possible, get ourselves into those situations so that we can create that experience on the floor. So the bands that we love, [Nightingale](#), [Clayfoot Strutters](#), [Crowfoot](#), [Great Bear Trio](#), I felt like we were in their shadow our whole career. [Nor'easter](#), like your work...

Julie Vallimont

Well, of course, we were all inspired by the same bands: Crowfoot, Nightingale...

Ben Smith

We had just started and then [Perpetual e-Motion](#) criss-crossed the nation. And then, [the Syncopaths](#) from West Coast. [KGB](#), I could keep on going. I'm sure there's lots more that I'm missing here. We can put them in the notes afterwards. In all those cases, the tracks that always stood out to us are those ones that had just that incredible dynamic arc. I'm making gestures with my hands that no one can see here. Start with like that simple tune, and then it just builds and builds and builds and builds and builds and builds. There's several different patterns you can do, but just like that just carries you through. So one of the you're asking what did we start with, when we had started back in 2008 and 2009 we played a lot of three set, three tune sets, kind of standard, that's the device we use to propel momentum through the piece and we'd think about key changes, like classic contra dance band formula. But now, however many, this is twelve years later, we have stripped out almost all of those and I'd say more than 50% of our material is a single tune. It's just one tune it's in one key and we very much trance out on it. We keep the melody going, but then we'll like break the melody. We'll just tear the melody apart. Like break it down to the essence of whatever the tune is and then build it back up again. That's the kind of interplay that we do in that in that group. And we've also headed a lot towards having what we call pedal points in the classical world, or like drone tones. If we're in D, we'll be holding the D through the whole thing, but oftentimes Matt won't finger the E string on the guitar so you have this like D with that open E, like the higher E, or just all ringing through the whole thing.

Julie Vallimont

So that makes like just a permanent sus chord on the I chord basically...

Ben Smith

Right, gives you that little bit of tension that is kind of just woven into the fabric of it.

Julie Vallimont

I love the I chord as a drone, I think it's kind of underrated as a chord. There's more to the I chord than just resolving to it from somewhere else, which is the main satisfying way that people use it. But I don't know, I feel like a lot of tunes have drones built into them. Especially if they're written on instruments that literally have drones, like various kinds of pipes and stuff or diatonic instruments. It helps you really build that atmosphere that you're creating, right, with that little bit of tension from that pedal point, like you're talking about.

Ben Smith

I think of music a lot visually. So like, I think of it as like when we go into a set to play, or we have a track that we're making, it's like a landscape, right? Like a big painting or like a picture just actually being in a landscape. And in our physical reality, landscapes don't change that much unless you're in a jet plane or a super fast car and are able to move through the landscape super fast, it's not really gonna change that much. The interest is in moving more moving slowly. I find it it's interesting to move slowly through the woods and I see that the type of... it's deciduous trees, it's like a beech grove, and then you start to get more oaks in there, but the ground hasn't changed much, it's still the same soil, the same sky, those things are like the backdrop, and then the interest is kind of like in this what can you do in the middle there? So I think of when the Mean Lids are doing their best work, the stuff I love the most is when we sort of stayed in the same place for the whole track and yet been able to move so far musically, like the seed has been planted at the beginning. It's just like, the banjo and the flute started

out, but then by the end, it's just like, huge and the speakers are going at full wattage, you're just filling the floor and just carrying like sonically with the sound waves, carrying people.

Julie Vallimont

It's an amazing feeling, and it's one of the reasons that dancers love you. I wonder, you know, being a musician who often tries to create that vibe also, do you get the part of your brain...like five times, like the caller gives you five more and you're like, what on earth are we going to do for five times more? How are we going to make that interesting? Because this happens to me but I don't think it happens to everyone or do you just kind of believe in yourself that you'll keep finding ways? Do you ever like how can we get bigger from here? Where else can this go? Do you get thoughts like that?

Ben Smith

I do and because I was a professor of music for a bunch of years, I actually broke this all down and would teach my students, so I wasn't teaching contra dance music I was teaching electronic production. Students that were like writing backing tracks for hip hop or electronic dance music or things like that. But same issues like okay, you know this track is gonna have to be three and a half minutes long and you've made it a minute and 20 seconds in. That's like a lot of empty space ahead of you, what are you going to do? Well, it turns out that from the compositional literature, everything has been done before, we don't have to invent crazy new tricks for all these things. But yes, when they say five more through I do run through my brain, I'm like okay, what do we do? What have we already done and what can we do now? And also when there's only five you can't, well it depends on who you are but I wouldn't, like at the five mark, I wouldn't do like a totally crazy thing like of like, not switch tunes because it's just introduced a whole trajectory that you can't finish. The repertoire of things, and in the contra dance world you can learn these just by listening to all the bands, listen to all of them, so have we, have we just like dropped out the rhythm recently? Could we, just have, like we got five, that's a nice little arc you could build, we could just cut back to what did we do at the very beginning of the whole song? So we're in like the musical theater sense reprising the intro, so it's like oh yeah we started with banjo and flute alright Matt, stop, we're going to take the next one and we just do banjo and flute and then the next time you're like okay well now we can introduce something so we would say like okay, bring in the feet and then banjo I'll switch to doing more like chords and Miriam keep playing the melody, whatever. The the tricks which I guess, mostly boil down to, you take something away or you add something. And that can even just be like if I was playing the melody I could, quote unquote, take that away by switching to me playing the rhythm now and where I've added that as the component. So doing it on stage is super fun, you have to be on your toes. Five, though, is also an awkward number. I really love three. I lose count. If the caller says five I'm like, can you just tell us when we get to three or two?

Julie Vallimont

I love hearing you talk about this because for me, as a dancer, musician, playing with that energy and that arc is one of my favorite things to do where you're in the moment and you're trying to read the floor and like, do they look tired? Do they want us to kind of pull back a little bit or is it full steam ahead. I feel like a lot of bands when you run out of ideas, the obvious thing to do is just to pull back a little bit and then come back hard again. But the thing I like about the Mean Lids is that you don't always do that. I remember sitting there watching you guys at CDH [Conradancers Delight Holiday] with Noah [VanNorstrand] or something and Noah has this amazing gift where his brain doesn't analyze music,

which means he gets to enjoy it in this whole different way than I do. I would be sitting next to him be like Noah, look they're not backing off. What are they gonna do? They're gonna play off the cliff. Are they gonna run out of ideas? But you never do of course, you just find ways to intensify the emotion, and I think especially when you're an experienced band and you're used to playing with each other, you kind of know what you can do. You can always go deeper. I remember that was one of the first lessons we learned in Nor'easter once we had played together for a little while, the caller would give us one more. It'd be like okay, time to ramp it up, and then the dance would end and then like oh we had so much more. We're like a race car and we only ended at 100 miles an hour but we probably could have gone 120 and so I started asking callers to give us two times from the end and then three and then sometimes I was like just for fun tell me five times from the end. I don't know what I'm gonna do with that information but it's really interesting to find out. It's an interesting experience, I think all bands should do some kind of exercise to find out how much you have there and just like keep going past what you think is the emotional peak because there's often more in there that you didn't know you had. Like the thoroughbred in the last bit of the horse race you know all of a sudden gets this burst of energy or whatever, which the dancers love.

Ben Smith

That phrase 'leave it all on the field' comes to mind like yeah, you don't want to end the night of the contra dance and be like wow, we definitely had another 20 mph there that we could have done. What are we doing with it now? I know also...I think about this, I should actually just do this with myself more often. I was in a workshop with a blues musician a number of years ago and I wish I remembered his name, I kind of...it was at the University of Illinois and I was just walking past one of the one of the lecture rooms and there's this blues guy. It's like a classical opera program, and there's this blues guy in there like talking and like demonstrating outside so I just like, went in. And the exercise that he was having everybody do, regardless of what style of music when they got up to like play a little bit and then he'd like critique them. He wanted everyone to play whatever their thing was in the like, quietest, lightest fashion that they could. Like the most quiet, minimal, like find a way to like, make it down to the essence even...so then he was like, you know, like "Alright, take away all those extra notes you don't need those notes like here in this part here. Don't do all that fancy stuff just hold. You know just like, hold that. And so you'd have them do that and every time he was like, "No, quieter, quieter, do quieter." And then the flip side of that as loud, as full as like pedal to the metal, find your sixth gear or whatever how many gears up you can go and play that. And he was awesome like, in getting these people who were playing like they understood what forte was, it's loud, but getting them to just like, unleash like to the point where they're almost breaking their instruments, like just all the way to the wall. And so I did not play, but I took that home with me and and tried it. And then I've...with the Mean Lids, we don't do this in any sort of structured way. But it's very much that sort of an idea too. Like what is the...if this is the tune we're gonna play...so a tune that we do this with, Julianne Johnson, what is the simplest, lightest version we could play? And, you know, we might play that. We usually, actually we wouldn't play that while the caller's like teaching the dance because nobody's really listening to us. But you know, at some point in the middle, maybe you break it down to like, what is that lightest minimal one, where it's not so light that the dancers think you've stopped playing, and they just stopped dancing. That's when you know the floor, if they just stop. So what is that lightest, minimal version? And then on the other side, what is pedal all the way to the floor? We think we...could we do more? Right no we're like, we're not...our hands aren't bleeding yet, but they could. We could be breaking the strings. And

Matt actually is notorious for breaking strings at those moments, often, which is problematic, but anyways...We power through it. It's exciting, like, what is that...get all the way to that edge? So finding those limits and knowing that both individually and then as a group, like where, where does your band go? What's your range? What are your speeds? I think it's immensely helpful as a group to then be able to know what what you could do in a moment when someone says five more times.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, yeah. And the dancers like, feed off of that, too, because there's this amazing feeling of being a dancer and you think your body's tired, and then all of a sudden, you get this rush of energy, and it's like, your body's dancing itself. You know, the music, like, I used to feel like that dancing to Nightingale all the time. You just, it's just...or Crowfoot you know, like afterwards, you're like, whoa, I'm a little tired. But in the moment, you don't...

Ben Smith

You didn't notice at all. Yeah!

Julie Vallimont

No, you don't notice it at all. And it's, it's, that's really cool. Yeah, I feel like to really get to that place I have to have dancers or people, you know, like, it's...you can't do it in rehearsal the same way because there has to be that...

Ben Smith

I know...

Julie Vallimont

That conduit in order for it to happen. And that synergy of like, when you start pulling on the energy, and the dancers start responding, and then you respond to them. And it's like this positive feedback loop. Yeah. It's just really great. Yeah, so like, repertoire wise, you sort of have all ended up, you didn't make it as a New England band for very long. And you sort of have ended up playing a lot of original material and things like that.

Ben Smith

Yeah. Yeah. Sorry. Yeah, to get back to your question. So we all had been writing tunes, you know, and I was a composer and I wrote a symphony, I wrote a string quartet. I wrote choral works.

Julie Vallimont

That seems a lot harder than writing contra.

Ben Smith

It is, it is a lot harder. And I think fewer people listen to it, too. So yeah, so we all had written tunes. So we were already...so as soon as we started like, playing for dances, we were already like workshopping our tunes to see if you know, what would they would fit with and how they would get into the mix. And then gradually, we just gravitated to playing those because we felt more passionately about them. And also, we would hear things like...so I have a tune on our latest album that I wrote after hearing [Elixir](#) at

[LEAF](#). I don't remember which one it was, but one of the LEAF festivals I heard Elixir. And they played this tune that had this like, like a kind of ska, but kind of like reggae horn line in the background behind them. I was like, "Oh, I just love the rhythm of that horn line." It was just like two chords, they were going back and forth between. So then I was like, I'm gonna do a whole tune for us that captures like that rhythmic pattern. And so it's on there. It's on the [Prairie Summer](#) album, Little Gravel Wocks. And so we just started out all three of us playing that that rhythm like [sings syncopated rhythm] while the chords are changing underneath it. And so actually, years later we, I think we split LEAF with Elixir. I think we did. But anyways, we played, we played something with them. And we played that and then afterwards, we're like, "Did you hear that? You hear that?" And they were like, "No, it doesn't mean anything to us. What were you doing? We don't hear the connection." But yeah, so we very much moved into...we heard something that we really liked from another band, we like sort of make it our own and write a tune it was inspired by that. Or just things that just came to us. You know, we're inspired by watching the trees. You know, I'd write a tune on the banjo and we learned to play it. But also that helped us I think, figure out how to like build those, those big shapes. Like we were writing the tune and workshopping it together. We kind of gravitated towards putting the right things in or stripping out a lot of stuff out of a tune. To support the like structural way that we wanted to, like shape the data set. So like Yeah, yeah, so like on our [Kalyx](#) album, the first track, Glenn's Triumph like that, that was a fun one. We all lived like down the block from each other. So we'd get together a lot. And so we wrote that one actually like, in like, all three of us sitting there being like, oh, how about if after that bar, it went like this bar? And I'm like, Oh, no, I don't like that one so much. And if you listen, listeners if you listen to that track, really carefully, you'll hear that Miriam and I don't play the same melody. Like, we have refused to this day to concede which version of the melody. But I really like it, because it gives it a heterophonic feeling where we're both playing the same thing. But we have our own variation that fits together.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I think that not all tunes are as well suited as others for this kind of treatment that we're talking about. Right? So when you're writing tunes...you can steer them into that direction. And like you say, craft them so that they will fit that need. How was it received when you started playing around the Midwest, where people are used to dancing to a lot of old time? What was that like for you?

Ben Smith

Ah, so in the beginning, there was very, very mixed reception. We had a lot of detractors for a long time, especially on the like, we had some...I think it's also on our first album, A.M.J., there was a track that we played that, Matt and I played that before Miriam joined and we played that at every dance. And we would have dancers come up to us, and tell us how they could not dance to it. And they were like, "Don't ever play that again here. We can't hear the phrasing. Like, what are you doing? This isn't contra dance music." So it was, yeah, so they were not into, and what did...there was even a phrase for like they labeled several, like, some of the organizers out there labeled us as something and I don't remember what it was. It wasn't even like, newfangled. But you know, they didn't consider us like anything like the normal bands, because we didn't just play the melody the whole time. And we played like all this, we're trying to get them to dance to these other rhythms. And it was to like, yeah, like 'amorphous' would be the word I would use. I don't remember. But it's okay, we won them over. We also learned a lot, I mean, we made a lot of mistakes back then, you know, we would do like the trancy

thing, and the caller wouldn't be able to figure out where the A and B sections were. So we learned a lot, talking a lot about that, and had to learn how to like, even in the tunes that were very amorphous, we had to learn to make the, either the very end of the phrase, last bar, or the start of a new one, very clear. You can be amorphous for the middle six bars. But the last one, and the first ones need to be very clear. Which also was something that led me very much into my DR Shadow electronic work as well, like, you have to be able to know where those phrases are.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah.

Ben Smith

Yeah so I learned a lot about one of those things. And then so you know, it took us several years. You know it actually didn't take us all that long. So we, I had set out with the idea that I really wanted the Mean Lids to be a weekend band, like I wanted to play dance weekends, and camps and festivals. And I didn't just want to play all the local dances. Also, I was on the trajectory of graduating with my doctorate and at the University of Illinois you don't get a job there if you graduated from there, at least in my program. So I knew I was gonna have to leave. And if I left, that meant we weren't gonna be able to play the \$50 Friday night dance. We were going to have to get the big traveling gigs. So I was pushing us hard to get to that point. And so 2012 we played a little weekend in...[Squirrel Moon](#) in Wisconsin, really adorable little weekend if it's still going on and you need to get to Wisconsin, you should absolutely look that one up and go do it. It's super fun. So we got that one. And then an organizer from Utah was at that dance, and heard us and then offered us our first flying gig, to go out to Utah in 2013. Yeah, it was 2013. And I was so pumped. And it was like an existential moment for the band. Because we suddenly realized, like what like, flying to a gig was gonna mean. You have to, like, you have to be able to be a band that can like, get away for a weekend and you can take time off of your day jobs and plane tickets and also with the same weekend as [Sugar Hill](#), which like, we hadn't missed in like 10 years. So anyways, so we decided to do it. We did it. And that was the...launched us on our career of playing bigger, bigger events. And then people from there heard us on the west coast and east coast people picked us up. And you know, that was that was, yeah, was the beginning of awesome things. So how long did it take us? Five years? Yeah. We had to do some time there in the...on the road to get up to that level. Also, there was no, yeah, I don't know. I guess it's a unique path for everybody. But the Midwest there weren't, we didn't have any other bands to like, talk to about it, you know, there are no other weekend bands from the Midwest at that point. Well, that's not true. I mean, there's [Sam Bartlett](#), he's like in all the bands.

Julie Vallimont

Right, and you know, he still had a lot of New England roots at that point even though he's living there. A lot of his bandmates are not from there.

Ben Smith

He's not homegrown, entirely located in Midwest. Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. Well, you know, it's interesting talking about electronic music, because, of course, this is going to come up, which I'm looking forward to talking about, it's like, how you got started doing DR Shadow and what inspired you to do it, because, you know, especially thinking about the elements of writing electronic music, and when you're talking about in the Mean Lids, how you will kind of vary the arrangement by taking elements in and out. And like that's something that is a very classical way to do things in electronic music is like, you've got all these different elements, you can add them, you can remove them, you can modify them, put them back in, and so there's a lot of commonalities there. So it'd be fun to dive into those parallels a little bit. But, yeah, so just how did you get started doing that? What was your impetus there?

Ben Smith

Yeah, so my impetus was, whenever around like 2010, or whatever, there was a resurgence of the techno contra idea was catching hold, you know, we were seeing it in, you know, LEAF and in [YDW Youth Dance Weekend](#) and the other people, I don't remember all of the who was starting at what times, but there was lots of players, there's a lot of interest in this. There will be at a dance weekend, there'd be the midnight, you know, dance to DJ music, by various, you know, young whippersnappers, such as ourselves. Getting up there and doing it. And I was very interested in this because I had long felt that there was a very, very parallel connection between that that like, trance state in a contra dance like I can get to and like a really good contra dance. You know, where I'm just like, my frontal cortex kind of like shuts off and I just am transported for a little while. So that in the end, we've talked about this in the contra dance world, paralleled with very similar experience dancing to electronic dance music and more of the like rave side of things. Again, of just like being completely transported by the, by the music. And so for a long, long time, I felt that the the two could work together. And Perpetual e-Motion very much like still with acoustic instruments was entirely dabbling in, not just dabbling, straight out playing in that space. Yeah, pulling in those electronic elements and looping and like really putting it to the forefront. Like you're obviously, you're doing it, there'd been other bands, you know the Clayfoot Strutters they had pedals you know, they had electric guitars, there's, you know, things were happening in the fabric of their sound. Anyway, so about a decade ago, this is like all happening and I'm, I went to every single one that I was that I could, that I was at, and dance to all of it. You had some great dancers dancing to Michael Jackson and, you know, yeah, Ariana Grande, like, what, you know, all these things that were getting mixed into the contra dance but then I'll tell you, I started to get frustrated that we were dancing contra dance with music that was not not intended for the space, like, was being co-opted for an entirely different musical environment, and often did not have the phrasing that would line up with the dance. So we'd be dancing along, we'd be coming up to like, here's, here's long lines or like, here's the big balance, and the music would not have the balance and then there'd just be like, there'd be this gap. And then while we were in halfway through a swing, the music would be like, boom, boom, boom, this would be a balance time. Yeah, but because that's not how the songs were arranged so I was like, I do electronic music. Can I take this back and figure out a way to write tracks that then marry the...at the time I was really heavily into, and it had just actually...it had just started coming out, the genre of deep house and tech house, which just like took over the world of electronic music. And I loved the..I assume most of our listeners are not steeped in the deep house space. There's often...those tracks are very, very simple. There's just like one drum pattern that goes through the whole track. And there's a bassline that is what they call a pluck bass or a plunk bass that sounds a lot like an upright bass electronic. And again, they're very simple and it's like, focuses on this like

syncopated kind of melodic bassline. And then there'll be other parts that have like, there'll be some chords or be like, what they call little 'stabs,' like organ hits. Not usually melody driven at all, but it's like the rhythm and then just like cool, cool, cool bassline, just like huge, but with a lot of space, it's not usually, there's two, sort of two styles of deep house, but the kind that I like has this like really spacious, spacious as in there a lot of rests between the notes, but plunky basslines. So it's like, "Can I take that kind of a sound and then like, figure out how to get a banjo and a fiddle on top of it?" And initially, I thought, I'm just gonna use archival sounds like from Library of Congress recordings. And I don't, like I'm not going to record myself, I just want to use these like, Appalachian fiddle players. So the first track I made had Hobart Smith, old Appalachian fiddle player playing Cluck Old Hen. And I just sampled that in the same way that the DJs and producers would sample, you know, old vinyl recordings, and made that into a track but then spent like a year trying to figure out how to make an eight bar phrase, where the end of the phrase is really indicated by like, everything in the track that I can, like, there has to be like a drum, the drum pattern has to have a little break in it to indicate that this is the end of the phrase, the bassline has to have clearly like either resolved or come to a pause point, like everything's, it's always eight bars, eight bars, eight bars, eight bars. It sounds like a like, a like a kind of, it doesn't sound like it's that fun, but when you're dancing you don't notice that. Like it sounds like it just keeps on going and it just keeps on driving and building and all, and there's all those sonic cues in there to help the dancers just always stay in, so they know when to get out of the swing, right or...

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, they're almost subliminal cues at that level right, where we're building them into the electronic music to kind of try to balance out what we're not able to do live.

Ben Smith

Mhmm, oh and the other the other part though, was that a lot of these were pre-mixed tracks they were just like three songs mixed and the DJ was up there hitting play and then we danced to it and I wanted it to be live. And you wanted it to be live.

Ben Smith

I know because we, I mean at the same time you were doing the, launching the [Buddy System](#) techno dances, or maybe you predated me by year or two I don't remember... But you did the same thing, like making it live and making it phrased you know, and like being able to to do things live on stage in response to what the dance hall is doing...what these dancers are doing.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah!

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, honestly I was really excited when you came along because I had been doing like the Double Apex thing and the Firecloud thing and then Buddy System and I was like is anybody else gonna do this? Please somebody do this. I want someone to do it different than me and maybe better than me or just different, but like there's so many different ways to approach the same variables, right? The variables of like, we need to create a cool dance experience that's still trancy but it keeps the phrasing,

there has to be some live component but you can't do it all live or else you don't have time to lay down that many loops in the contra dance.

Ben Smith

And live loop it, yeah.

Julie Vallimont

You know like it's just you know, Perpetual e-Motion really did an amazing job pushing the limits of what you can do with looping and built looping. But that has limitations too because in eight minutes you have to follow a very tight timeline to be able to build...get your loops down and layer them and build your arc. And so you know, some of their best arrangements had to go the same way every time. You know, like when they did Flying Tent we all knew how it was going to go and that was part of the fun, that is not a bad thing at all necessarily. But if you want that flexibility to be able to play with the energy in the hall like we were talking about before I was like oh, we can't live loop everything. It's not possible. Anyway, I was really excited to see you come along because it's like, I can't wait to see how Ben is going to approach this same thing and play around with this format, which is really fun. Yeah.

Ben Smith

Yeah. Yeah, and the...what I've found since I...so I don't do any live looping. I play live banjo and fiddle with my tracks. And I have it all sliced up, use Ableton and so I can you know, I can skip scenes and I can like, add more drums or take them away or whatever, you know, do filter effects and stuff live on stage. But I, I quickly and I also had wrestled with this as a classical composer, electronic composer, for a long time is what is that... what is the notion of live-ness? And what does that experience, what does that, what does the audience need to know? Because, like, a classic example is pop singers who are lip synching to their own tracks. Right. For years and years and years and still today, I'm sure it's still this got to be standard practice in a lot of places. It doesn't matter. Like, you're there for the show for the awesome show. And they sang it once, right? They did sing it, and you're seeing them on stage, performing it for you. And whether or not it's actually their vocal cords vibrating in that moment that you're hearing or you're hearing a recorded version of them. Like, I mean, fools us, right? We still think it's live. That's great. I'm all in for that, right?

Julie Vallimont

I mean, we all know they can't dance like that in those outfits. You can't like dance upside down while your backup dancers are flipping you upside down in a corset and fishnets and have perfect like pitch and tone control. Like we all know, that's not possible. Unless you're Beyoncé, maybe

Ben Smith

And the vocal production of like, those are all recorded with super nice, you know, studio mics and pop filters and now you're expecting them to have like a, either like a little headset mic or like one in their hair or in the costume...that's not going to pick up! It'd sound terrible. But anyway, so yeah, the the notion of live-ness on a, on a contra dance stage and I mostly, because of just sort of functional reasons, but I can very much justify it sort of philosophically is I can play...so I'll start out a track and I'll play the melody on the banjo. And then second time through, I'll hit and launch, play the pre-recorded version of me playing that banjo part. And then I switch to playing like the countermelody or something.

The pre-recorded version is exactly what I just played in preview slightly, a couple of notes are different, but no one knows it doesn't matter that it's...

Julie Vallimont

It's like your live looping with your past self. And like you're replacing, it would be as if you just put that loop down except it's not a live loop, it's a loop from before.

Ben Smith

It gives me a little bit, it gives me a safety net. So that was like, the functional part if I mess something, if I mess up and I won't mess up playing the banjo, usually, I would mess up the recording, like I would start recording one bar in the second bar and miss the first bar or whatever. Like that kind of stuff I can't deal with on stage and dancers have no tolerance for mistakes in that in that case, right? You have to, if you're on stage, you have to deliver a really solid musical set.

Julie Vallimont

Right, the rhythm and the phrasing can't get disturbed too much or else it throws the whole dance off.

Ben Smith

Yeah, you can't have a nine bar phrase somewhere just because you forgot to hit record.

Julie Vallimont

It is true even like in you know, both of us working in Ableton Live there's a lot of cool quantization and phrase alignment things where you can't screw it up too much. But the way that Ed [Howe] and John [Coté] and Perpetual e-Motion were looping with like looping pedals, there are a lot more things that can go wrong. Yeah, you know, because if you tap your foot off by a fraction of a second, then your loop isn't the same length that like it gets it gets longer every single time because it's not the right length. All these weird things can happen, you know, and using Ableton Live eliminated a lot of that problem for me at least my loops are always the right length, but you can get the phrases in the wrong place and that's weird.

Ben Smith

Yeah, I thought a lot about when I was setting it up thinking about that, sort of like safety nets and, and fallbacks that we have. When we're playing acoustic music, we can do that. So if something goes wrong in the dance, like the caller, somehow messes that up and like, you know, this doesn't happen all the time but...we have memorable moments of either the caller calls the wrong thing, or, you know, somehow extends the swing too long or two bars too long as acoustic musicians at you know, if we done this enough time, we know how to add two bars in to you know, to get back to the right point or we get... Or, the Mean Lids quite often, not quite often, it's happened a few times, let's say you'll be in a really trancy space and we'll just be on one chord and we will drop the melody altogether, great rhythm just jamming on this drone. And then we won't remember where the A part is. And so you have to get the caller, who's usually sitting there looking at the next card they're gonna call or whatever trying to pick it out and be like, "Hey, can you just tell us where the the top of the A part is or what section we're in?" And then they we communicate and then we get back on? I mean, not like... nobody knew other than us in our minds are like, shoot, we just played five As in a row. But in the electronic music world,

how do you recover from those things as well? And so I've been building up my sets thought a lot about "Okay, so if any, I don't care whose mistake it is, but if somehow the dance gets off in the music, how do I recover from that?" Actually I ended up writing some Ableton Live devices that would jump all my tracks an arbitrary number of beats forward or backwards at the click of a button, it's like I'd be like, "Okay, I'm gonna have to jump six beats for right now go." And just, they all jump.

Julie Vallimont

Did you do that as like a Max for Live device or something?

Ben Smith

Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that's fun.

Ben Smith

And I've had to use it a couple of times, when a caller, cause I mean, I'm sure you've done this too, electronic music is not what most of the Contra Pulse listeners probably, if you're listening to this on Spotify, the rest of your playlists are probably not electronic music. So it's, and I love, this is like, I feel this is like a new direction in contra music that I just love the incorporation of all of these other influences and styles of music. But I can't, I can't imagine, because I don't call, but as a caller, if you don't listen to this music all the time, that's got to be like, a total mind mess to to like, figure out where these phrasings are, when you don't have standard New England or any kind of melody on top of it. So I've had oftentimes had callers who called with me the first time, will let the swing go for 12 bars, or 12 beats you know, and so each time through like the first three times I'm having to jump all my tracks four bars.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, because they don't realize, they're like waiting for the music.

Ben Smith

Yeah, they're waiting for something. Yeah, so there's been a lot of, I've had to do a lot of like corrections. And then I'm, of course very pleased that I have the device sitting there in my system to be able to seamlessly just catch that up and no one needs to know. Everybody's having a great time. Also, the lights are low, and no one can really see anything very well...

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, right. That really helps. Yeah, no one can see the look on your face, I'm making my squinty face at the computer like "Oh, I messed this thing up, how can I get this off." Or in Ableton, I would have my set quantize to four beat loops so that I couldn't accidentally get off by half a phrase. And then the caller would get off by two beats.

Ben Smith

I know, yes!

Julie Vallimont

And then I'm like, OK I'm permanently off from you and there's no way to fix it. And finally I realized I just had to turn off all my quantization and just hit the spacebar really fast at the right moment. Toggle it off and on, which is the most terrifying thing to do. And so then I was like, "Oh, I need a solution for that." And so then I worked in new ways into my set of doing that and automating that with a knob and anyway but you know...I just say to our listeners, you know, like, Contra Pulse so far we've mostly focused on acoustic music. We've talked about techno contra a little bit here and there but this is our first deep dive and I feel like you and I could geek out about this way past anybody's interest levels. But I imagine that it might seem like, why do you do all this work with all this fancy gear just to try to recreate the simple live music of just playing tunes you know that you can do on the fly? But of course we know why, because it's fun and it's a challenge and I like the sounds of electronic music and I like the way you can compose things in advance and you know, but it does seem like, why don't...what are they talking about like when you get off and you can't fix it so you have to write a special app to help you fix it because you're not a human in that moment. You know, like so what what are the rewards for you? Why is it all worth it?

Ben Smith

Because I love dancing to electronic music, and I love dancing to contra dance music, and I love dancing to the two of them when they get smooshed together, and I like listening to it like, musically I find it really interesting to hear the world of our folk music blended with this what is really like a contemporary folk music like EDM is written by young young-ish people such as myself but younger than me, usually in their bedrooms and in their basements you know. I was teaching them for years here at the university and they, their whole communities you know, they're on Soundcloud and they're on Bandcamp and you know, they're all over the internet like sharing these tracks and and coming up with new style variations and new tricks and there's a million YouTube videos about how to do you know these different design different sounds... So like, that's a whole...there's a whole community and that is a modern folk music. Maybe people will talk about it as such in you know, whatever 100 years when we can finally look back and say it was like, you know, an ethnomusicology thing with our, you know, this acoustic folk music. And it's the sounds of those two, when they when they are put together really well. I find it so compelling. It's like so interesting, like two parts of my musical brain. Both get activated simultaneously. So I love that. And then the way that we've, so this is where we can totally geek out for a while, is how that music is being accepted or sort of coming into the contra dance practice and the way that events are set up and the way that it's billed, sort of like how it's messaged and how it's experienced in this space. I find that really fascinating. But at the end of the day, when all is said and done and we're at the dance, and it's either late at night, or in the afternoon or whatever...but last time that we were at Flurry 2020, that...the dance hall set where I did the electronic dance, just packed with people, and it was hot and sweaty, and just lights up the crew that did the lights were awesome. And the sound was amazing. Like, that was such an exhilarating hour and a half like, what was created right there, everybody coming together and doing that was...it was something, something new and different that we had created there.

Julie Vallimont

Absolutely.

Ben Smith

Just for that, you know, it doesn't have to be for everybody. You know what, you know what, I love dancing to old time music at contra dances and I love dancing to the more New England, whatever variations you want...whatever buckets you want to put it all in. I love all of that. And I love finding new ways to like create these really powerful music dance experiences.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's just a different flavor. It's a different way of bringing out a different facet of this tradition and activity that we already love. Right? Like yeah, I you know, having played so many of those like late night Flurry electronic contras and then also playing in the live room in the main hall. They're just different feel, you know, everybody's closer together and the lights darker. And it's just a different event. And, you know, I don't think any of us, at least, that you or I are trying to replace live music with electronic music, which is I feel like something that sometimes people might be concerned about, you know, it's just a different flavor.

Ben Smith

No, yeah, no, absolutely not at all. I don't think we're anywhere near the saturation point where we'd start having to edge out acoustic musicians. I'm more like, I don't know, if if you are talking about this on this podcast, but we started out as the phoenix, right? So the phoenix is going to come back. I'm really interested in to see what the all these means. All of us. All of us musicians who have had kind of, well definitely not played as many contra dances as we used to. What what are we going to come back with? Like, new influences? Are there new bands? You know. Is there, are there, are there gonna be like, are there new dancers? Like, presumably not as many new dancers given the pandemic? Because there would have usually been, but there must be some. So like, what is there's gonna be so many new things.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. And maybe also this feeling of rustiness. What were we doing? And why were we doing this? And also like why was this musical thing so important to me then, now I want to do something different you know, like yeah, some of us may end up abandoning some ideas of like, I really liked this tune then or this fancy arrangement, but now all I want to do is x or whatever, you know, who knows? It'll be really interesting. And you know, some of us are still continuing to listen to traditional music and contra music and some of us aren't, some of us don't listen to dance music when we're not dancing. Some of us do, you know, and so that's a chance for, are we going to be more pop inspired when we come back or whatever we've been listening to you know, who knows? It's an interesting question. But I think like, for me being able to create this electronic music is dependent upon there being a thriving live acoustic contra tradition.

Ben Smith

Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

I only would do the electronic music because the other tradition is live and healthy and thriving and flourishing and full of innovation and variation and that's what makes this other electronic thing possible. And that's fun.

Ben Smith

Yeah, and that's also, as I said, you know, I originally started up just to use like Library of Congress recordings, and call...all of you who are listening Contra Pulse, go find a DR Shadow track, if you will, and listen to it. Because then I, you know, so in the electronic world, they are sampling recordings and using them in hip hop, hip hop and that stuff and I started out, I was like, "You know what, Nightingale just retired. Crowfoot just retired," like you can't dance to them anymore. I'm going to sample their recordings and put them in so, so my, the first, I think it's the first track on my album, I don't remember. Anyways, it's called [First Chance](#), and it samples Nightingale. And that's the whole point of the the track is it's Nightingale samples and it's electronic music that I produced. I've got another track with oh, actually, I couldn't release the Crowfoot one because they didn't give me permission to sell it. But Nightingale did. But yeah, so sampling the acoustic bands, and those are meaningful because those are our bands. Those are our contra dance bands. I danced to that track when Nightingale played it, and now I sample it and play it electronically. And that's really the significance of it to me. I'm not just sampling any music and none of that would be as meaningful if we didn't have the acoustic band playing also. This is a, this is maybe somebody in the...no, we're gonna have acoustic music forever. It's actually, someday when we don't have electricity anymore we'll only have our acoustic instruments and we will learn, actually, alright so this is kind of a funny circle, funny circle, this is, so I did, so I've also sampled my own band, Mean Lids, playing Glory in the Meeting House, an old time tune. And I did that as a track. Well, I do this thing in the B part of it in the electronic version, where I cut the melody into like just the first three beats and then do that little like syncopated loop of just that little pattern. And it's just a little scale running up. Well, now, Matt, when we play that tune, sometimes when he plays the B part, he will play that that cut version, the chopped up version, he plays acoustically on fiddle.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, Noah and I have done that too with Buddy System, and we'll come up with some electronic motif, and then we'll just start playing it on our instruments at a regular contra, you know, it's fun. I feel like it's a...writing this kind of music is like a musical playground. And you can experiment with so many things that you can't do when you have to play everything live. And, like for me, I also love tech house and deep house especially, I think they're really well suited to contra because they naturally have this kind of phrasing to them this, like intrinsic rhythm. And they're just generally they they're, they feel good. You know, they can, the sounds are good. It's not like dubstep where it's a little more aggressive. Tech house can be aggressive, but the bass sounds so good. It's like thick and warm. And as a piano player, I would just naturally wanna like, I would often play a bassline on my left hand and chord stabs on my right hand. But there's only so many basslines I can play on the piano. It always sounds like a piano, I was not interested in acoustically...[triggering other sounds from the piano] I could have gotten a MIDI box and done that. But I just wasn't interested in that, you know, like, that's what doing these other electronic things is for. But being able to program a bassline that is unplayable by human hands, or, you know, just is going to crank out and be perfect while you're trying to do other things. So sometimes when you're doing two or three things at once they

all suffer for it. Yeah. And just being able to get into those sub bass frequencies, which I think is very trance inducing.

Ben Smith

Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. Which, you know, most of our instruments don't go to...that's why people really love octave pedals. You know, I know you've used one for your violin before.

Ben Smith

Yep.

Julie Vallimont

And being able to go down there. It's really great. Yeah, and so, you know, I know this is your interview. But I'm curious what you think about this, is that for me, I get kind of soapbox-y about the word "evolution" in terms of music, especially. And, you know, just like you have a background from like, the computer, electronics and things, I have the background of a biological end of things and I don't like talking about electronic music as an evolution of contra music. In a sense it is, but a lot of us misunderstand what evolution really means in like popular culture, because it's been kind of misconstrued as, like a linear progress towards a better outcome. You know, like, it keeps improving, improving, improving over time. And, you know, real evolution isn't intentional. They're just mutations that accumulate. And sometimes they suit their environment, and then are a benefit, and then become very popular. But then if the environment changes, they're no longer adaptive, and then they disappear again. So in that sense, electronic music is an evolution, but I never mean that it's better. We're not improving on anything. You know, that's not the point, right?

Ben Smith

Yeah. So, so my understanding is evolution of that it's a it's a response to environmental stimuli and stresses, right. And we typically see it as one species is responding to those environmental changes, which leads to species change as a whole because the older pre-evolved version can't survive. Like, as the planet gets warmer as it is, some species are gonna fail to survive or fail to evolve to warmers, whatever situation and then they will just die off.

Julie Vallimont

Right? But it's not an it's not an intentional process, like a species can't decide. You know, like, they talk about that even articles about COVID. They're like, Oh, this COVID has just become more virulent. It's decided to be this and I'm like, "No, it hasn't decided. It happened, it happened to accumulate this random mutation that happens to be favored in the circumstance and happens to spread more because it is now more virulent or transmissible" or whatever, you know, and so...

Ben Smith

Oh, okay. So yeah, no, I agree. And in this case, I think we're doing things intentionally. So it's hard for us to do that. But you could step out and use a statistical model to look at how the sound is changing.

But I don't think the environmental...we'd have to quantify...I would want to know what the environmental stimuli that might be forcing the change is, which I don't think is here, are the acoustic bands in any danger of being wiped out by this new strain of electronic contra dance music that has decided to become more virulent? No.

Julie Vallimont

No, at least that's not our goal and if people think that that's our goal, it's definitely not our goal.

Ben Smith

I think the bands are doing great. One area that I do think about as a sort of, like an agent for my own bands, is one of the environmental stressors is just budgets for events and travel budgets. So you see, I don't actually have the hard data, but you look back and see that bands like Clayfoot Strutters, which carried a lot of people, were less tenable than Perpetual e-Motion, which is two people. They were able to travel and play everywhere. I think also, the Mean Lids, and you play in a duo, and have trios, the three person in terms of the contra dance space, that's a price point at which a lot of medium and smaller weekends can afford to bring us out. If we had five people, we wouldn't be as attractive. We'd be spending a lot of budget just on travel. So that's like an environmental stressor, that would cause an evolution in the way that contra dance bands are formed.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, and that's not why we're playing electronic music because you as one person could theoretically get paid three times as much as what the Mean Lids does per person. Like if, say, there's a gig that pays 200 bucks, Mean Lids does it, you come up with 200 divided by three, versus you do it by yourself as DR Shadow you get the whole amount but that's not why we're doing it. I don't think any band should kind of put market pressure on, like that works against larger bands. I think it should ultimately be up to what the dancers and organizers want and can afford. There have been stories of some smaller groups asking for more per person, you know, oh, we're a duo, we're doing more work therefore, we should get paid more per person and people in six piece bands getting paid less per person and it gets dicey sometimes.

Ben Smith

You'll have to do a Contra Pulse business segment sometime.

Julie Vallimont

No, thank you. It's fun to talk about the things that we love about why we do it and not worry about all these logistics, right?

Ben Smith

Exactly. It has to be rooted in our...in the heart and our passions. We just spent a bunch of time here talking about how hard it is to write electronic music to fit into the contra dance scene but we do it because we're passionate about it, and we can't stop.

Julie Vallimont

Right. And honestly, okay, soapbox number two. I'm curious what you think about this. I don't think that, at its heart, playing electronic music for dances has to be that different than the feeling of playing chestnuts for dances. Because one of the fun things about doing chestnuts and I've seen this at dances like Gilmanton, New Hampshire, you go to their dance, you play Chorus Jig, everybody sings along to the [sings the B part of Chorus Jig] that's that...Money Musk, you'll know it. Everybody knows it, that feeling of familiarity. That's where singing squares come from, Golden Slippers and the pop songs of the day. Beatles contras were really big and have been big for a long time, how is this different? We're just taking our musical vocabulary that surrounds us, our milieu, and we're taking it to a place where it feels familiar, and combining it with something that we like.

Ben Smith

I like it, I'm sold.

Julie Vallimont

So for me, it honestly comes out of that same instinct. It's just so fun to see a bunch of people dancing and then singing along with something that they know, too. It's really fun.

Ben Smith

And now we see, you know, shout out to Emily Rush and her Rushfest. People are singing along the whole time.

Julie Vallimont

Exactly. It's so fun. I also often wonder, we've had this huge diversity of tunes and contra music now, it's less of these workhorse tunes that everybody knows and more of new compositions, and every band has a different repertoire of their own tunes. And for the dancers, it means that they don't know all the tunes and can sing along with them. Except that some of them are so iconic that if you start to follow these bands around, like Great Bear's fans know their tunes better than just about any fan...I mean, it's weird to call them fans, they're dancers. But those dancers sing along with their compositions [sings the main theme from Great Bear's "Cosmic Tim"].....Cosmic Tim or whatever, just like it's Chorus Jig.

Ben Smith

Yeah, exactly. In terms of what happens with the future of contra dance music and all that kind of stuff. I'm fascinated to find out what other influences come in. I listen to so much music and I like listening to it. I'm not passionate about writing it into a contra dance thing but I hope somebody else is. I want to dance to music that brings in all those influences. I was thinking just like in terms of accompaniment, like backup rhythms that we hear all the time in contra dance at least in the kind of music that we play and it's nothing like what you would have heard at an acoustic contra dance in the the 80s say, guitars had a rhythm, they played straight ahead. And now I don't even know what rhythms Matt is playing most of the time. I mean, it's some sort of like Central American Zimbabwean smash up of like, syncopated threes against other things. I don't know, it's awesome. It's just so different rhythms that we hear in all the music, we listen to you just filtering into what comes out of our fingers.

Julie Vallimont

So it's not boom chuck.

Ben Smith

No, it's not. It's fun to dance to, so I'm all about it.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, and there's probably some people who prefer dancing to the more traditional backup and that's fine.

Ben Smith

I love that too. I want it all.

Julie Vallimont

Exactly, but then this other thing is also really fun to dance to. Do you ever worry about what is traditional? And like, how far you would go, do you think about that when you're creating your electronic compositions or doing weird things?

Ben Smith

So the only way I do think about that (and I'll get back to, I think the essence of your question in a second) is...and also ties back to like, so if you're just playing the fiddle, what is your dynamic range? What is the loudest fullest, most aggressive version of a tune you can play and what's the most quietest, gentlest sweetest version of it? In the electronic space it's almost unbound, like, the outer edges of what is the most aggressive wild thing you can make, versus the sweetest thing is huge in any way you could possibly think to parse that. So that's a thing I think about a lot. So, DR Shadow, I'm very much trying to define the sort of sonic space that I work in. And there's like, what I think of as like three subtle variations of bassline types that I use, just in terms of the synthesis sound, so an actual sampled acoustic bass, a piano, and then we actually have two kinds of electronic basses. I limit my palate to that because I have to set guardrails, and you have to know this is DR Shadow's sonic space, and this is the way he works. He's not just suddenly going to have some crazy dubstep thing, it's just not going to happen in the set. So like that, in terms of crazy things I might do for each project, I have to think where am I, how am I going to define that landscape? What's my color palette, and then try to stay within that in the same way that if I'm playing the fiddle, the fiddle can only do so many things and you always know it's a fiddle. In terms of the traditional, versus exploratory or whatever, I'm really not worried about it at all. I don't think about it. I love things that are music that is a tradition. I love playing in old time jam circles where people are, out here in the Midwest, we have the Battleground Fiddle Festival and Clifftop, where the practitioners of the tradition come together and play the traditional tunes in the traditional styles in a very communal way. You wouldn't play electronic music there. I wouldn't even bring my baritone fiddle there, that's not a traditional instrument, you play a regular fiddle. I love that and I want those things to be preserved and I want that tradition to stay alive and be passed on. I'm a part of that tradition and I play traditional banjo, and I'll play it in a traditional style. But I can wear two hats, haha, back to the band [The Mean Lids.] I will do that and then I'll also be an experimental DJ. I don't have any conflict internally. I love fast food and I can love gourmet dinners, no issue loving them both.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, absolutely. I wonder sometimes if the sign of a healthy tradition is that we don't have to worry about whether it's traditional or not while we're doing it, because there's so many great contra bands just playing acoustic music, I don't have to worry about like well is this traditional or what is this gonna do, you know? I'm like, hey, let's try this thing and just have fun with it and see what happens. The main thing that I always want to know is does different kind of music change the way that people treat each other on the dance floor?

Ben Smith

Ooooooh, what are you thinking in terms of 'treat?'

Julie Vallimont

Well, I have noticed, experimenting with all sorts of different kinds of electronic music and I also tried sampling things in the beginning. First of all, because it takes forever to write electronic tracks, so in the beginning I just wanted to learn how to do it so I would sample stuff because it was easier while I was writing things at home. The music affects how people dance and some music sometimes they flourish more or are more focused on their partner experience. Other times they're more focused on the whole group experience and because the sonic palette is so much wider so it can be gritty, it can be almost violent, electronic music can be if you want it to be. Obviously I'm not gonna play dubstep. I did sample some Skrillex once for a techno contra because I was just really curious what would happen. Anyway, I'd be curious, have you noticed, do people dance differently because it's a different vibe? Also the lighting, to me, is a big part of it. Often organizers would want us to do a techno contra while we are at a dance weekend but they're like well we don't have any lights and it has to be at three in the afternoon, and I was like no we tried it once and it was just so weird because it's the atmosphere to help build this trance like space and it's a more like introspective space and so you need the lights and the late night also helps because your brainwaves are different at night and, you know....everything. I'm just curious, what have you noticed?

Ben Smith

Well, yes I mean absolutely people do, and I think they both dance differently and then as you say, treat each other differently. You see that just if you play like a more sort of like an English country style set, play some lighter tunes for a dance, versus, playing some of Noah's original compositions in Buddy System. It's a very different thing. People are gonna be more like gliding, gentle you know, lighter weight in the hands versus full on jumping up and down dancing. So, from from that then, yeah, absolutely the electronic music. I've never actually seen like mosh contra, but I'm sure you could do it if everybody agreed. I'm not at all concerned, I've never seen violence on the contra floor that I'm at all concerned about. I do think though again, getting to the trancey, I have several DR Shadow sets that break down to a very smooth, again, very drone like and then build it up layers and layers and layers of strings and rhythm and little bits. I see dancers, I think the squares [minor sets in the contra dance line] get a little closer together when they're circling because you just don't want to move as far and you want to be more side-to-side kind of gliding versus other tracks that have much more of that deep house very syncopated bassline, You get people like just moving further. I think it very much does. I want to get back out and do some more contra dances so I can observe, and see if I can see what's happening.

Julie Vallimont

For me, it's just like you wanted to do this, but keep that live element because to you, that's a really important thing is that connection with the live music and the dancers and the caller together, which is also important to me, even though we ended up approaching it from different ways, like technologically, also, because you're a melody player, and I'm not. And that really changes what each of us can do. But for me, I also don't want to lose that connection of somehow, somewhere this is fundamentally a community dance, where people are looking out for each other and taking good care of each other on the dance floor. And that, to me, is more important than the tradition of what does this tune sound like? Because we've played tunes with electronic beats over and over, sometimes I'm like, this is not necessarily a good look for this tune. I know we're abusing this tune by doing all these weird things to it but that's not the tradition I'm trying to uphold in that moment. It's still a community dance where we're all dancing together in the hall, as opposed to like a partner dancer, or an individual dance, like at a club, where you're dancing by yourself, do whatever you want. What kind of things are you thinking about while you're up on stage, and you're watching the hall and adapting in the moment?

Ben Smith

What am I thinking about? Well, actually it's kind of like a phased thing when I'm...so it's more so when I'm solo doing the DR Shadow stuff. But in both cases, it's sort of like several phases. The first is the beginning, watching the dancers and listening to the caller, and making sure that everything is going fine. Because if the caller is going to, like, it happens every once in a while, where the walkthrough wasn't good enough, or whatever, messed it up, and you just have to stop and start over again. So you got to be ready for that, ready to stop on a dime. But then just watching, are the are the dancers, like, when the long lines go in and out how wavy are those lines? How many people are making it to the long lines on time versus catching up late and at the transition, if there's like a pass through or something, across the floor is everybody passing through smoothly. First three times through the dance, there's usually a lot of kind of variation and fuzziness. So there's that initial phase of watching, is it going, and if I'm doing the electronic music, then it's watching very carefully to make sure that I'm phrase lined up with the dance, and making sure, because I may need to jiggle it, whatever. I also do the thing where I just sort of keep a generic beat going through the walkthrough, so they're like a rolling start kind of thing, always. And then I cross fade into the tune. So I've got the tune playing, the set playing in my headphones, and I'm watching the dancers and making sure that we're lined up before I do the phasing so that...if I crossfade in there's the potential to mess everything up pretty badly and look like an idiot in the process. So getting that right is the first part so very much just focused on that. And then as soon as things are going, which is probably like the fifth time through, if I'm solo, or sooner for Mean Lids, it's more flexible, then breathe a sigh of relief. Things are off to the races, and then, then watching and sort of feeling the dynamic, then I'm starting to shape things like, what am I feeling? Are we going to go up? We're going down, are we going to make this really trancy track? We're five dances in, we're one before the break, do people need something energetic to keep them pumped or do they need a little bit of a breather, like getting into that space. I don't really articulate that in my mind anymore but just sort of like that's more of the feeling, sort of the gut feeling of where are we at? Where are we going, what's going to make this really fun, and then riding that through till over two minutes from the end of the track, which is four times through, and then getting ready to figure out how to get out of it. And looking to the caller to be like, is it gonna be three times, two times? And then having to

get back into very much sort of action. The Mean Lids, we're usually talking to each other at that point being like, what are we going to do? Which way are we going? We're going up, we're going down. That's kind of the journey for eight minutes.

Julie Vallimont

You must have a pretty good grasp of tempo, especially doing electronic music where you can just dial in the tempo that you want. What tempos do you like to work in?

Ben Smith

So, electronic music I mix everything at 120 beats per minute, because then given our awesome technology currently, it will tolerate slowing down to about 114 or speeding up a little bit to like 225 without any trouble.

Julie Vallimont

Ooooooh, because you're using samples. This is one fun thing that because I'm writing everything in MIDI I can slow it down as long as I want because it's generating audio in real time and not stretching it so you have to be a little careful with your samples.

Ben Smith

I can't go down that far so that's the range and then when we're playing acoustically we can go further but right now I'm happy playing like around 100, but not for a contra dance. Depending on the crowd, and oftentimes we check with the caller if they have a lot of experience calling in terms of like, do they think that the audience or the dance hall is full of people who want to go at 120 because that's a good clip, you're moving versus if it's a lot of newer dancers or whatever we slow it down, we will play 112 to 120, anywhere in there all night long. And if left to our own devices, we probably would be slightly on the 112 side these days just because it's comfortable.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's a nice nice place to be. I remember when I first started doing electronic music for contras I was doing them faster like 121, 118 or something, sometimes 124 felt fun and it was a simple dance with a lot of petronella balances or something, can go faster. And then one of the dancers said you know, I just assumed that they'd want something driving and energetic for electronic music and they're like actually if you do it slower we have more time to dip each other. I was like, oh so then I would sort of alternate the tempos and have some that were slow and languid and then some that were faster, driving you know, it's like, oh, serving a different thing here some of the time.

Ben Smith

The music that I'm sampling and the basslines that we've mixing in those are usually 124, 125, that's kind of deep house tempo. Which again is like you would be dancing as a single person just jumping up and down. It doesn't matter if you keep the tempo perfectly and you don't have to synchronize with anybody else so faster is exciting. There's so many interesting things all around the way that, again, that like the communities have sort of embraced electronic, electro contra, techno contra, and sort of are integrating it into the events and this idea that it is a thing for the cool kids and everybody's dipping each other and all those kinds of things. I think that's really interesting. There's nothing inherently about

the music and it's the same dances as far as I know. I'm really waiting for someone to write a dance that somehow is electro contra only. I don't know what that would be, a challenge for the callers out there figure out why you would choreograph a dance differently if it were to electronic music.

Julie Vallimont

I did want to do an electric contra dance, just as an aside, I don't mean to interrupt you, but callers out there, I wanted to do contra dances at late night that do work at 96 beats per minute so I could play all these amazing electronic grooves that I want to. Write a contra dance that works at 96 beats per minute. Will Mentor, you seem like the kind of guy who would do that, get on it people! How can you walk that slow and still enjoy it is what I want to know.

Ben Smith

That's the music I'm writing these days, intentionally not to be contra, I suppose originally, but you could do it. I would love to do it. You play English right? I don't, I have once, but the tempos vary a lot in that don't they?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, they do.

Ben Smith

People are still walking and they enjoy it a lot. So...

Julie Vallimont

Dot, dot, dot.

Ben Smith

What is that contra dance, that slower groovy contra dance...?

Julie Vallimont

Now that we all get older, maybe I want to create the new thing of like late night slow contras, candles, relaxing vibes.

Ben Smith

That'd be very fun.

Julie Vallimont

You would dance totally differently, you'd have to fill up the time differently. I want to try it out. It's like something we would do at like 3am at CDH, to test it out and see if it would work or something like that. While we're talking about the future, where do you think things are headed? Or where do you think things might go after the phoenix arises from the ashes?

Ben Smith

I have occasionally entertained kind of the fears that a bunch of events will have disappeared, communities will have evaporated, some things might not survive, some of these events that we used

to go to might not come back. And that's a little bit scary, I don't like that feeling at all. But on the other side, very confident that there's so many people where contra dance has been an integral part of their lives for so long. I just like fell entirely in when I was 15 and I'm not giving it up for any reason. I think there's going to a lot of like phoenix rising moments of, when it's safe, and we can have events regularly people are just going to be ecstatic. I'm going to be ecstatic. Just like the outpouring of emotion is going to be so, so huge that the phoenix will rise. There'll be new generations of dancers and this will go on and you know, my kids are growing up, I have an 11 year old, he doesn't know this yet, but he's gonna be a contra dancer. He's gonna love it. I don't know when new things are gonna happen, but whatever normal was, will we go back to normal? I don't know. But I'm 1,000% a believer that the passion of folk music and contra dancing and folk songs, this is all, it's all here. We keep on doing it. If anything, we're more like the bottle that has been corked too long and someone's shaking it up and now it's going to explode with champagne all over the place. celebrations, and all these good things.

Julie Vallimont

It's amazing to think about.

Ben Smith

Yup.

Julie Vallimont

Well, it has been so wonderful talking with you today, and it's just been really great to reconnect. Thank you so much, Ben.

Ben Smith

It's been my pleasure. This has been a delight.

Julie Vallimont

And someday the phoenix will rise again and we'll be back at it in the future.

Ben Smith

We will. We will. Yep. Keep stoking the fire.

Julie Vallimont

Keep playing slow tunes. You gotta keep those embers burning right. Well, thank you, Ben, take care.

Ben Smith

Thanks, Julie.

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