

Contra Pulse Episode 39 – Becky Tracy

Julie Vallimont

Hello and welcome to Contra Pulse, this is Julie Vallimont. This episode, I sit down with Becky Tracy. Becky has been a defining presence in some of the most popular and innovative contra dance bands to come out of New England, being the fiddler for Wild Asparagus, Nightingale, and Eloise & Co., and has performed for dance events and concerts in about 40 states across the US, as well as Canada and Europe. Her early years of learning to play the fiddle were marked by classical training, until she began playing for contra dances in Maine. These experiences led her to study Irish fiddling styles with Brendan Mulvihill and Eugene O'Donnell, and French Canadian fiddling with Lisa Ornstein. It is from all of these influences that Becky's distinctive clarity of tone shines through, a rhythmic attack owing much to French Canadian playing and the melodic quality of Irish music. These days, she shares her wisdom as a fiddle teacher at summer music camps. The Brattleboro Music Center is also lucky to have her as a teacher of fiddling and Group Celtic classes alongside her husband Keith Murphy, with whom she also has a traditional music project known as Black Isle Music. In 2001 she released an enchanting solo album, Evergreen, which has charmed many. In our conversation, we discuss her musical trajectory, the ways that learning and community builds upon itself through tunes, reminisce on that irreplaceable feeling of returning to your home dance hall, and so much more. Let's dive in!

Julie Vallimont

Well, hello, Becky Tracy, and welcome to Contra Pulse.

Becky Tracy

It's my pleasure to be here Julie.

Julie Vallimont

I am so excited about this. It is so lovely to have you here. Thank you for joining us. I believe we're both in Brattleboro on this blustery November night.

Becky Tracy

Yes, we're not that far away from each other at all.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, but the audio is better, ironically, over the internet. I was noticing that tonight is the night of the hard frost, I think, like the real frost so it's going down to 23 tonight. I went around and picked the last couple flowers that were still around in the garden and tidied up and stuff. This is the time of year when it's always great to go to a dance hall. In New England, it's cold and dark. It's definitely dark by the time you drive to the dance, but then you get there and I remember pulling up to the Concord Scout House and you hear the fiddle music even from the street because the windows are open miraculously, and the strains of the fiddle music, and then you open the door and the rush of hot humid air would come out of the front doors.

Becky Tracy

When you say that thing what I think of were, like, the first dances that I went to sort of as an adult, when I was really on my own. And that was in Maine, and going up to the Bowdoinham dances. I remember going in the winter, and we'd go by the ice fishermen that were there on the water just before coming up to the hill and this light would be spilling out of the hall. And then the music would be spilling out of the hall and exactly the same as you were describing the heat and humidity as you entered the hall.

Julie Vallimont

That's so evocative. And it's like the late fall can be kind of gloomy. The contrast between like, you know, we're all a little cold and creaky and maybe we're tired after our day, 15 minutes in that hall, with just that feeling of joy and energy and movement. It's like an emotional hot tub sort of thing. Like all of a sudden, you feel warm and happy and just all that concentrated joy in one place is amazing. I feel like fall and winter are my favorite times to contra dance to me when it's cold outside and warm inside. Maybe not for everybody but for me, they're always my favorite.

Becky Tracy

Exactly.

Julie Vallimont

Well, I am so excited to hear a little bit about your back story and how you ended up playing for contras. I know that it's part of your family growing up, but why don't we start from the very beginning and talk about how you started playing fiddle and then eventually how you found your way to playing for dances.

Becky Tracy

So in my family, I have four sisters, and I am the fourth, so it's five girls. I'm the fourth of those five girls and everyone played an instrument before me so there was always this desire to be like them because they were much older than me. But I had to wait. I knew at five years old that I wanted to play, but I had to wait until it was introduced in the school. I did the thing that a lot of people do, they grew up playing through the school system, taking lessons, doing recitals, the whole bit. I finally had a really lovely teacher in high school. And then when I went off to college, I also had an amazing classical, all classical, but I wasn't necessarily a great classical player. I loved playing, I was totally one of those ear people who would cheat and learn the music. I'd kind of follow along on the page, but I would be learning the music by ear. So I'd sort of get it as the orchestra was forming, doing their stuff and then as I got to know it, because of my ears, then I would be able to play it. So the connection to playing by ear was, it was always there. When I was in about middle school, I mean, I also grew up dancing because my dad was calling and he was calling for Girl Scouts, and the local schools and just little community dances. I would always go to those, he would drag us along. Sometimes he would have a band, not very often, most of the time he had his cases of 78's and his record player just like so many of those callers did. But the bands, that was something. There was a formative moment when I

was about 16 and Welling and Wallach were playing. Will Welling and Bill Wallach. Have you heard of those guys before?

Julie Vallimont

I have heard of Bill Wallach.

Becky Tracy

The mandolin player. And [Will Welling](#), is now in maybe Albany area, he plays fiddle. I sat in with him once when I was 16 and it kind of changed my whole relationship to the music, there was this moment of sinking in to playing, whereas before that I would read the music out of a book, you know, [Becky sings a simple fiddle exercise] and then my dad was like, well, hey, here's how it goes. He'd put Don Messer on or something and I would do that sort of eighth grade storm out of the room, slam the door, I can't play like that. So that was a pretty formative moment, playing with those guys. Somehow I just sunk into what they were doing and was able to play along and you know that joy of when all of a sudden you can play with people and you feel like you can do something. That's pretty amazing. I didn't start playing for contra dancing until after college. I went dancing. I went to [NEFFA](#), I grew up going to NEFFA and then I went to NEFFA as an adult, which was totally different.

Julie Vallimont

Where did you grow up by the way?

Becky Tracy

I was in Connecticut, but my grandma and grandpa Bemis, Josephine Bemis and Chuck Bemis, they were in Natick, Mass. He called dances and she led Girl Scout troops as well, teaching dancing. And when she was in her 80s and 90s she did senior groups, to young people, I mean, that's what she called them. They were in their 70s but she was the senior groups. So anyway, they were in Natick. And so we would always go up because she was in Natick, she helped get NEFFA to Natick, that was one of the things that they were able to do because they lived there I guess, I don't know, because it was years in Natick, years and years. So as a young kid, I went up there and we would watch all the dancing and we would go watch my grandma's Girl Scouts and go eat great food, and then when I went back, past college when I was living in Maine, I went to NEFFA for the first time on my own. I don't think I ate.

Julie Vallimont

Were you too busy dancing?

Becky Tracy

Yeah, I don't think I slept either. I was too charged up.

Julie Vallimont

Wow. Did you have friends there and stuff?

Becky Tracy

I had friends just like, you know, that greater recognizable contra dance community, but I kind of went on my own, you know?

Julie Vallimont

But then you meet like your dance folks. So you kind of recognize them and you maybe have someone who you always asked for a dance.

Becky Tracy

Exactly. It was that kind of thing. Anyway, so it wasn't until I was in Maine that I started actually playing for contra dancing.

Julie Vallimont

What finally got you into it?

Becky Tracy

I went to a contra dance, I was in a new community, so what do we do when we're in a new community? I went to a dance to meet people to dance, to have fun. I was dancing with this guy and he said, so do you play an instrument? I said yeah, I play the violin. And he's like, oh, you know, I go to a lot of sessions, would you want to go to a session? So this was Michael Connolly, who was a piano player and bodhran player and dancer, clearly. He dragged me around to any Irish session I was willing to go to or any kind of session, but a lot of Irish sessions and also dances and whatnot. And before you know it, I wasn't doing a whole lot of dancing. I still did go to dances but then there was the bands that formed and yeah. And then you somehow learn to play fiddle tunes. Yeah, at that point, I realized how much I just loved it. I sunk into it immediately and was learning, I don't know, zillions of tunes. It was amazing. He kept feeding me tapes. He would give me Planxty, and the Bothy Band, and De Dannan and just all these great bands and just have me listen and listen and listen. I was pretty obsessed and then I moved to Vermont and met more players, more amazing players. Just lots of people there. Walter Weber was a fiddle player up there who not a lot of people know about but he had a really beautiful style. He had played with a Green Mountain, that group what were they called? The Green Mountain [Volunteers] ... they were dancers and musicians, Sam Bartlett played with them.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's slipping my mind at the moment. But I know it's come up in previous Contra Pulse episodes. So if we can't remember, we'll link to it in the podcast notes for our listeners. [The name was the Green Mountain Volunteers.]

Becky Tracy

But yeah, because they traveled in Europe and stuff and he did some of that. But he was he was up there, just a beautiful player and I got to play with him in a band there. So that was pretty fun.

Julie Vallimont

Where in Vermont was that? You say, up there, because we're also in Vermont. This must be a different part of Vermont.

Becky Tracy

Julie, what you don't know is, that's the real Vermont. According to them we don't really live in Vermont. We're kind of down in Massachusetts, you and I. [Julie and Becky both live in Brattleboro, VT.]

Julie Vallimont

Totally, we're an extension of the Valley. I remember the first time I went to Alaska, and we landed in Anchorage and the people there said, the best thing about Anchorage is it's only half an hour from Alaska. I kind of feel like that down here in Brattleboro a little bit.

Becky Tracy

Right. So sorry, up there in Vermont. I was in Bristol, Vermont, which is right near Middlebury, and not far from Burlington. So just a whole host of really fine players up there. But then I moved to Connecticut, after that. Slightly kicking and screaming down to the, quote, Gold Coast. But, anywhere you go, there's that musical family. So down in Connecticut, there was [the Fiddleheads](#) and they had been going a long time. I think they are still going in some form or other. Because they were based out of New Haven they were the kind of group that would sort of just take in people as they came through the New Haven community and then would move on. They are great players, Ellen Cohn played the piano, mostly, beautiful, really beautiful piano player, really fine. That was sort of the back path, kind of my learning experience of playing for dancing, pretty much amateur bands that were just looking to have a great time playing for dancing. That's the way to do it, just play. Not really high stakes, free to just be there and be in the music and be with the dancers and try things and learn as you go. Exactly.

Julie Vallimont

It doesn't all have to be fancy. Although sometimes it's fun when it is, but that could come later. And then somehow, you ended up in some of the most seminal bands in New England.

Becky Tracy

So what happened? I had those years after college, I spent those years teaching math. The move to Maine, it was for a math job. The move to Vermont was to follow a guy but still, there was a math job there. Same with going to Connecticut, I found a great math teaching job in Connecticut. Every summer I would play more and more and more. I was, in the meantime, taking lessons, I spent some time with [Lisa Ornstein](#) and I spent some time with [Brendan Mulvihill](#) and [Eugene O'Donnell](#). I was every summer just so much more immersed and then I'd go back to teaching, and you can't really teach the way one wants to teach and be a performer, fiddling, if you really love it that much. You can't do both of those things in a super big way. Teaching is, if you want to have a career doing something, maybe it's being a postal worker or something where you don't have to bring your work home so much.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, right. Teaching can be very all encompassing. I was a teacher too for a long time and it felt like my time was never really my own.

Becky Tracy

Exactly. Because you'd come home from work, and then you'd have more work to do and you'd also be exhausted and you'd want to play theoretically and yet, you didn't have the energy.

Julie Vallimont

I mean, ironically, I feel like at least for me for the last 15 years being a full time musician has also been all encompassing and my time is never my own. But my time is always my own in a sense, in that just because it feeds me so much and I enjoy it. So it's funny, the stakes are different and there's a whole lot of differences.

Becky Tracy

It's all encompassing but in effect, you have control over it even though you might not think you do. You actually do.

Julie Vallimont

Even if you might say, oh, past self, why did you need to schedule these things so close to each other? Did you forget that you need to eat and sleep? But we still have control over how we schedule those things and how we make our choices and then we learn in the future, we make our schedule better for next time.

Becky Tracy

We try, sometimes and then something comes along, and it's just too good to pass up.

Julie Vallimont

That's right.

Becky Tracy

So there I was, what I decided, there was just that last year, the first day I went back to school, I knew that something had to give. Early on in that year, I wrestled with it and then I just decided, okay, I'm gonna take a year off, I'm just gonna try this thing. I can tutor math, make a little bit of money that way and I can just see what I can do and so I took the year off. I did the ridiculous thing that so many of us do, which is to drive many, many miles for tens of dollars. And seriously, tens of dollars, I remember one trip coming home with \$12 in my pocket. I'm sure I spent at least that in gas to get to the gig. But there was also, for me, a challenging thing was to call people up and say, would you like me to play for your dance or would you like me to play with you because I was playing with the [Fiddleheads](#) but I didn't really have a "band band". I was just going out there. So a couple of things happened. The summer before, I had met Jeremiah [McLane], a few years before, when I was living up in Vermont. I remember one particular Champlain Valley Festival jamming with him and David Surette and was just loving it. So he was there, sort of just as a person I knew and then I met Keith [Murphy] at [Pinewoods](#), he was there all summer and I just went to a fourth of July and then I saw him again at another

Champlain Valley. So those two men were in my consciousness. Keith and I shared some tune learning when we were at Pinewoods. And those boys had started to team up and play with different people. They had played with Viveka [Fox], and they were playing with Kerry, a lot of Kerry Elkin, they were part of the Fresh Fish gang. They had a gig in New York City and they didn't really want to stay in the city so they came to stay at my house before they went in and so we jammed late into the night and then they went off and did their gig. That particular weekend was a big weekend for me because I had a gig with Eugene O'Donnell, down in Philadelphia, and I just had this little tiny spot in this concert, it was like one of those Mick Moloney, Eugene O'Donnell, lots of big Irish players. I was going to play this... Downfall of Paris with Eugene to this cathedral full of people. That was a big event for me and I was all sort of a flurry of excitement around that. I came back for my gig, just full of that event. The boys decided to come back to my house after their event, and we played more music. In the meantime, they had said they had been sort of nattering in the car and were saying, oh, we need a fiddle player for that event down in North Carolina, maybe Becky can do it. So it was one of those old Fiddleheads weekends that happened down in North Carolina, down in the Asheville area, Black Mountain. So they asked me if I wanted to do it, and I was like, of course. And so then we spent time becoming a band, essentially, at first we were preparing for that gig. But then there was the amassing of tunes, and then it was like, oh, well, Keith is good at these songs that Keith has, let's back those up okay, let's make a tour, let's not just go to this weekend, let's drive down and have a tour and let's play concerts on the way and you know, the thing that happens? That's the thing that happens.

Julie Vallimont

It went well.

Becky Tracy

It was awesome. It went well and as a result of the tour, Keith and I got together and that was the end of teaching. That was the end of that life. A new life was on the way. Both Stuart Kenney and Jeremiah suggested me to Ann [Percival] and the Wild Asparagus guys, as a potential because they were at a point where Sue Sternberg was going off to do her dog training stuff and so they were kind of looking. I remember two things that were kind of funny. The first was there was a dance that I was playing at the [Guiding Star] Grange with Mary Cay [Brass], and my then husband, Jim Sirch on pennywhistle and banjo and Stuart was there of course, and all of a sudden, there was somebody in the audience, somebody out there, the band was like, what's she doing there? What is that person doing there, is she in her pajamas? I had no idea who they were talking about. But during the break, she, big capital S, H, E, came up on stage and it was Ann and she said, you know, we're looking for a fiddle player and so she invited me to a party. That was my audition, was the party. So, I got to go to their house and it was a great party, with lots of tunes and lots of fun.

Julie Vallimont

This is the house of Ann and David Cantieni.

Becky Tracy

This is Ann Percival and David Cantieni, exactly.

Julie Vallimont

Was this the house that they built in the woods?

Becky Tracy

This is the house they built in the woods, this was that house. Exactly. So it was a big session in their house. I don't know exactly how it all happened but somehow there was definitely the sense of I was gaining approval from whoever was there. I have no idea. It was very funny, a very funny way to be auditioned for a band.

Julie Vallimont

That's pretty organic, right? Like that's the folk way to do it just jam and see if it works and I mean, having a good hang is as much important to a band as anything else, right? So if your bandmates can throw a good party and have a good vibe that's a nice thing.

Becky Tracy

I think the other test that they put me through was when they first brought me on the road. We were playing, we were up on stage, I think it was somewhere in Texas or might have been Texas. It might have been Texas, but it might have been some nearby state. Anyway, there we were playing, and all of a sudden, the band drops out and it's my turn but I didn't know. I didn't know this was gonna happen, all of a sudden, off I went. So that was another test. They wanted to make sure that I could hold down a roomful of dancers. And let me tell you, I had never done that before.

Julie Vallimont

It sounds like kind of shocking and a little terrifying. But also kind of exhilarating once you do it and realize, oh, I can do that.

Becky Tracy

Yeah. So in that year, there it was in that year, I stepped off into the big void and there was a safety net. By January I had essentially met Nightingale as it was going to become. We sort of decided we had a gig, our first gig was in May and not long after that I was starting to play with Asparagus and that, essentially was my musical-dance-career and life for the next 18 years.

Julie Vallimont

Amazing, it doesn't often happen that way for people. How old were you when that year, that seminal year was all happening?

Becky Tracy

I was 30 and the reason I know that, because I gave up teaching, right? And to mark that 30th year, I hiked the long trail. And so 30, leaving teaching, hiking the long trail is embedded in my brain otherwise, I'm not sure I'd remember.

Julie Vallimont

Wow, it's so interesting. I mean, my story is not like yours. But I came across contra dancing when I was in my 20's. I started playing for contras when I was 30. You know it's a fun time for a life shift. Like in your 20's we often think we know who we're gonna be but then in our 30's we're like, oh, actually, my life could be this whole other thing instead. I feel like that happens for a lot of people.

Becky Tracy

Well, there was a certain amount of stubbornness that carried me through college and the first part of my career, like, this is what I set out to do and dammit, that's what I'm gonna do. Right?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's hard to walk away from all that and you don't always necessarily want to. But also, we're kind of programmed sometimes to do things and it can take a while to change up the way we're thinking about stuff. Like you say, you just stepped out there into this whole other world, and it's been your life now.

Becky Tracy

It has been my life. There's a certain amount of full circle, now, especially because of the pandemic, in the teaching vein, that I had been a teacher all that time. Teaching has always been part of my fabric of the stuff that I've done through all this time, through all the contra dancing and stuff. But now it's a little bit, as you can imagine, more. And it's incredibly satisfying. So now it feels even more blended.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, because you can take those skills as a teacher, and use them to share this thing that you love so much. I mean, so many fiddlers who I talk to just on meeting them and like, oh, who do you learn from or who did you learn from, they're like, oh, Becky Tracy. Oh, I learned from Becky, like you've taught some amazing fiddlers who have gone on to form their own bands and play all over the country and do all sorts of stuff and that's really neat.

Becky Tracy

Well, it's definitely an amazingly satisfying thing to see them perform and to also play with them occasionally, that's really fun. Just a little bit. In fact, just wait, what day is this now? This is Friday. Monday night I had my first gig playing for live contra dancers in a while. It was for this very small group who has spent the entire fall together so they're definitely a bubble and it was their last night. My student Rose Jackson was with them, she was doing work for them, she was part of that bubble. She hired me to come and play for dancing. And so of course, we invited her to play along and it's just a big treat to play with your very competent student.

Julie Vallimont

Rose is a wonderful fiddler. Dancers, listeners might know her from the band Polaris most recently. I'm sure she's played with other groups.

Becky Tracy

Yeah, more informally, I believe.

Julie Vallimont

Yep. Oh, that's so cool. What a cool feeling. I mean, maybe it's similar, you play music with Aidan [Murphy], your son, sometimes, right?

Becky Tracy

Actually, there's nothing quite like that. I mean, you know, there's the parental side. We all love doing things with our children and when we get to do something that we love so much, and share that with our child, there's just no comparison really.

Julie Vallimont

Your family sounds pretty rooted in folk dancing and traditional music. Were there any other fiddlers in your family? Did you ever play with any of the elder members of your family or are you kind of the first one?

Becky Tracy

I was kind of the first one. My grandmother, who played mandolin, played like Red River Valley, mostly things for singing. She had been part of a mandolin orchestra back in the day. So it was a whole other thing that she did a long time ago but she wasn't a dance musician. She was playing for just singing along in the old songs kind of stuff. My dad played harmonica, it was just for pure joy and he played the flute, but he wasn't really playing the flute. I mean, it was a completely recreational thing. So no one else in my family, even though they all played an instrument nobody else played for dancing. How did they react when you became a full time dance musician? So I had this nice degree from college, right? I think there was a little bit of, what, are you kidding? Reality is, both my mom and my dad became my biggest fans. They would come to the [Guiding Star Grange](#) in Greenfield and watch me dance. They went to a couple of dance weekends and had the best time.

Julie Vallimont

They love this thing that you were doing.

Becky Tracy

They love that, and my dad really loved fiddle music so much. He was very much into it. He wasn't necessarily as into the Nightingale recordings. He was like, well, I guess people must like that. It's maybe a little more artsy or something, but you know, where's the fiddle?

Julie Vallimont

He was a Don Messer fan, right, is that what you're saying?

Becky Tracy

He was a Don Messer fan and a Winston Scotty Fitzgerald fan. Yeah, he liked serious tunes.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, with charismatic fiddlers right, where the fiddle is definitely front and center.

Becky Tracy

Exactly, not hidden behind that big accordion.

Julie Vallimont

Or some cool riff or multiple cool riffs. Oh, that's funny.

Becky Tracy

It is funny.

Julie Vallimont

So you've done a lot of teaching over the years, at camps and festivals and being a program director and running Northeast Heritage or other camps or private lessons. What are the most important things for you when you're teaching, what do you like to do or communicate with your students? To be clear, we don't always have to have those things all spelled out as a teacher, it's like you do it by doing it. You teach it by doing it and playing music together and teaching tunes, often the lessons are within the tunes that we teach. So you don't have to have an answer to this.

Becky Tracy

Okay, so going back to your specific question. It was, what do I like to communicate to my students?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah.

Becky Tracy

One of the things I talk about with them, and I don't even talk about it with them, it just sort of happens. We learn through tunes, and we learn techniques through tunes, but then eventually, there's this greater community, that starts to show up, somehow. Now, Keith and I teach Celtic classes. So often, I'll funnel some of my students into those classes, because in those classes, they find other like minded people, and people that they can go off and play with outside of class, they don't have to just come to class to play. When I feel like I've been successful is when my students end up playing either in other bands, or they have their little group that they've formed that meets every Friday night at somebody's house, and just jams and has a great time. There's of course lessons in just, as I was saying, technique, and making it good dance music, and all that stuff, but really, it's about connecting with others, and having this really beautiful way to be with other people. Of course, a really beautiful way to be with other people when perhaps you're a shy person and a person who doesn't really get out there. So, for me, maybe it's not what I'm trying to communicate, but for me, it's certainly a measure of success when that happens.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. Like, that's kind of the center of it. So perhaps in that sense, like technique and repertoire are the means to the end of being able to participate in this community and make music with other people.

Becky Tracy

Right. And of course, there are those players who just want to be really great players and that's fantastic. That's a really fun challenge.

Julie Vallimont

I don't know enough about fiddle technique to really talk about what you might do with them, but I'm sure you talk about, like, what kind of technique things do you focus on mostly?

Becky Tracy

It kind of depends on where they come from. So I have some players who are more on the kind of advanced beginning end of things, and maybe they've fallen in love with tunes, and they've learned a whole mess of them, but they can't really make them sound very good. Those people are going back to essentially violin technique, just to make gorgeous sounds on the instrument and be able to make these tunes speak rather than kind of creak. But then to the other end, I'll have, say, maybe a classical player who wants to now learn how to play tunes, and kind of needs in some ways to undo a little bit of technique to make the tunes come alive. So in like, a lesson situation, where it's one on one that's that the scope of what's happening. My way of teaching is through tunes, some people are more, maybe, exercise oriented. I'll develop exercises with my students when techniques in tunes are unreachable and they need more practice to reach those. Or maybe there's a lot of arpeggiation in tunes, and they need that. Or maybe they want to learn chords, and then it's time for some arpeggios, and chords and stuff. I don't have a method, I teach each student as they come. It's really fun, because it's like this puzzle, like, what's gonna work for you?

Julie Vallimont

And being able to sort of read what somebody else needs and respond to them is, it's like a subtle, but really important skill as a teacher, right? Because then you can connect with what they need, and give everybody something that makes them feel excited.

Becky Tracy

Yes, and each student teaches me. Because in that process of figuring things out I learn something new. They'll often come to me with, "oh, I just realized that if you do this with your hand, if you put your pinky on the bow in this way you can get a much better tone." I might have said almost exactly the same thing every single week, you know? But all of a sudden, there's a new focus, they have new words to describe it, they've made it their own so, of course, now they know it. But often, their way of looking at things will help me with another person, I'll have more vocabulary, because I can see that the people out here, all my students, they see the world in a different way than I do.

Julie Vallimont

That's really great, such an exciting feeling to watch somebody have a break through and then you learn something. Your particular fiddle style, when you're talking about your influences, a lot of Québécois influences and a lot of Irish influences. Are those the two main influences in your playing?

Becky Tracy

Yes, absolutely. Besides the general technique that I got that was built into how I play. I feel like when I was in the ninth grade, my bow technique was completely revamped by my first private teacher. It was a classical setting but it was because of the way he taught me to bow. I don't even know what I was doing before that, I can't tell you. He had this very specific technique, I would come in to his studio, and he would plop me in front of the mirror and we would do this thing called the jellyfish in front of the mirror.

Julie Vallimont

What did that look like?

Becky Tracy

So the way the jellyfish looks, is that your wrist is leading the bow all the time and your tentacles are your fingers. So the tentacles, the fingers kind of flow along behind, and then the wrist is still leading, exactly. There you go. That was the basis of all bowing from him and he had some pretty interesting techniques. I remember the aha moments, I remember like two major aha moments. One with him, when he grabbed my bow to make me get my hand in the right position. And another when I was looking at the mirror on my own practice, and I was like, oh, wait, look, that's my teacher's hand right there. I feel like that has a lot to do with, kind of, the sound. It's only because people, students have kind of described my sound to me that I've started to really pay attention to it as having like a little bite. The sound always has a little bit of bite at the beginning of it and then it kind of has a tail, it has like a bite and a bit of sound but then a tail, it's not like a flat sound. I really feel like his technique plus the French Canadian, there's certain players who have a really strong I think of Daniel Lemieux as one of them and there's many others. André Brunet, there's a lot of people like this who have this really strong single bow power that they can produce. I think it's like trying to emulate that. But then there's the sort of smoother Irish stuff and somewhere in between is my style.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it has the lyrical-ness, that's not a word. The lyricism of Irish playing but that bite and the bounce of French Canadian playing and that little bit of the raw-ness, like party time raw-ness. I don't know how to describe it, but that little crunch to it.

Becky Tracy

Grunge.

Julie Vallimont

The grunge, the grunge! Great! And then the tone that you got from your classical playing, like all together, which is amazing. When I was learning to dance, and I was watching bands, and I would just sit in the hall and watch all these bands that I love, playing. And obviously, Nightingale especially has been an inspiration for so many people. But whatever band you're playing with, Wild Asparagus, also a big inspiration, watching you play and looking at your face, you just seemed like you were enraptured most of the time. Your fiddling just like encapsulates so many emotions. But joy, to me, being this one that just stands out. You can have a lot of different feelings when you play, but it's just joyful, it's like you're flying. I don't know how else to describe it.

Becky Tracy

It certainly feels like that sometimes, definitely. You have the band to ride on and how great to ride on those bands. It's fantastic.

Julie Vallimont

What are some moments? Do you remember moments where you felt like, especially just in tune with everything and especially ecstatic onstage?

Becky Tracy

I do actually, there was some [Falcon Ridge](#) time with Nightingale. I don't know what was happening. But it was, it was like, one of these late night, it wasn't, it was the middle of the day session. We must have just been completely open and just going, because we could do no wrong. It was pretty incredible. It just felt, not only was the band playing really well, but the response, the dancers knew it and they were feeding it so that it just made it better. I can think of a lot of places where that's happened. I remember with Wild Asparagus once in the Northwest, where a camp that we went to year after year, right? So people would look forward to us coming back to this camp. We'd start to play and they would just respond in a way and and then you're feeling that love.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. It's amazing when all these things come together and it's like we're all set free. When everything, like, syncs up together, that everyone's just there and you can really get to this like higher place. I don't know how else to describe it. But it's like channeling the joy that's in the hall and then you're sending it back out to them and then it's just, I don't know. It's amazing.

Becky Tracy

Yeah, it is amazing. There was one time at Pinewoods when [Kathy Bullock](#) was there, it must have been a [Harmony of Song & Dance](#). It must have been that. Kathy Bullock was there doing her stuff and so she was on the piano and Keith had figured out that some French Canadian tune could be the underpinning of this gospel song. And so we started off and there was this French Canadian bubbling tune, and then she starts to come in and then she takes off singing. I have to say my whole spirit just exploded! Completely exploded with that. I mean, it's true that she could do that to me anyway, right? Her singing is so incredible but with people on the floor

dancing and singing, you know, like rocking out, not just singing but like belting it and then this other tune simmering underneath kind of felt amazing.

Julie Vallimont

That's incredible. I wonder if there's a recording or a video of that somewhere? Do you think that anyone happened to capture that?

Becky Tracy

My guess is that we were all just sort of in it, you know?

Julie Vallimont

I mean, at camps we discourage recording because it keeps you from being in it so I wouldn't be surprised. But you just remember those moments and those moments can feed you like years and years later or they inspire something else that happened. So even if you forget that the original moment happens, maybe the next week you write a tune or you have an especially good rehearsal with your band or joyful teaching session, they pay it forward. Although I would still love to hear it.

Becky Tracy

Exactly. The reality is, if I heard it again, would I think it was as good as when I was in it? There we were all in it just all being there singing or playing or dancing, or whatever. Our memory is big and fantastic but if we actually saw a video of it, what would we think, of a recording?

Julie Vallimont

I guess part of that feeling in the moment is just being amazed that it's happening at all, right? This thing has just happened out of the ether and the visceral feeling of the vibrations of the sound waves in the room and everyone there and the spontaneity of it all. When you watch a video, you don't have that context, you can't capture that. I would love to talk a little bit about bands and nuts and bolts and arrangements and things like that.

Becky Tracy

Oh, boy.

Julie Vallimont

Because you have several bands that have arrangements. You know, there's Nightingale and Wild Asparagus. There's Eloise & Co., and you and Rachel have some lovely arrangements. It seems like more in your collaboration, (this is Rachel Bell, the delightful accordionist and piano player, stealth piano player for a long time and now public piano player, which I'm personally thrilled about), it seems like you and Rachel, that project is just that you love playing together so much and there are arrangements but they don't seem to be like the point in the same way. I don't know, what would you say about that?

Becky Tracy

The thing that Rachel and I have discovered is that we love to dig deep. And we also have discovered that we have given each other permission when we, like, sit down to create, to really kind of go out there and play badly, really, I mean, honestly, we don't call it that. But it's like, the trying of stuff, there's no judgment in there. What the judgment is, is oh my god, that idea was really cool. Let's try that again, let's see if we can make that happen. There's something super cool in that. So the thing that we do to make it happen is we record a lot when we rehearse, so we'll sit down and we actually have, we've come up with, let's see if I can remember what it is that we talked about. We make the palette. The palette is that stuff, all that stuff, so we play and play and play and there's this idea and that idea, and all these things that we could do with a tune. And then we make a path. And we kind of like, well, what makes some sense of what we could do here and then we take out the chainsaw.

Julie Vallimont

Is that the editing part?

Becky Tracy

Exactly. We have to be cruel, and take out some of our favorite things to make it make more sense and make it so people will be able to listen to it.

Julie Vallimont

You have to kill your darlings.

Becky Tracy

That's sort of what we do to make arrangements and to make things for concerts or things for recordings or stuff like that. But we also have explored recently, more of when Rachel and Karen get together, they will play, just play.

Julie Vallimont

This is Karen Axelrod?

Becky Tracy

Karen Axelrod. So Rachel and I have explored recently, by having gigs that are just kind of like background music, the concept of just playing. We're like, oh, we're actually good at this, we can do this thing of just playing, we might not venture quite as far as we do in rehearsal, we might not be quite as daring but, it's really very, very satisfying. I think all the bands that I've been in, have been arrangement bands. Nightingale was a big, big time arrangement band, and we would craft and wrestle with our arrangements and go away from them, and then come back and have tunes, rearrange them, do them in another order, or with a different tune, or with a different concept. It was definitely a fine tuning of arranging in that band. There was one time where we had kind of a retreat in a way with Grey Larsen. Grey has his own head about arranging that's amazing. He had a lot of influence on Sometimes When the Moon is High, with that work.

Julie Vallimont

Grey strikes me as a musician who really likes those small details.

Becky Tracy

Exactly, that crafting. But Asparagus as well, when we rehearse, there's definitely, there's some stuff that is just kind of, like, here's our beginning, and then our transitions are going to be this, this and this, and here's our end. So there's some sets of tunes that are like that, but to make it into the sets that are more polished, and the sets that we want to pull out for the bulk of the evening, those are the ones that we spend more time on, and we're figuring stuff out and riffs and that kind of thing.

Julie Vallimont

So there's lots of different elements going on. Because one approach I think that actually works well as like a hybrid format for contra bands is just to plan out how you're going to start something, how you're transitioning to the next thing, and then how you're going to end and then in the middle, you can riff on that. That's what I ended up doing in Buddy System with Noah and most of the time, some sets we have are really arranged, but for a lot of things, just knowing how you're going to start and then transition, those transitions could be so important and magical, right? If you get it cleanly and clearly, and it has the impact you want, and then the end. But then it sounds like also, certainly in Nightingale it sounds like you guys had a lot of things planned out.

Becky Tracy

The thing about dancing is dancing gives you the freedom to mess around, right? Because dancing goes on for a while.

Julie Vallimont

You can't make an arrangement for a certain length because every caller runs a dance a different amount of time, depending on a whole bunch of different circumstances.

Becky Tracy

Well, we do have George Marshall in Wild Asparagus.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, right. I forgot, you cheaters.

Becky Tracy

We can kind of negotiate a little bit more in that regard, so there's a lot of playing around. I feel like there's, in some ways, there's almost like two camps. There's the camp of the band that's trying to make a shape out of most of their medleys. They're trying to define what the shape is out of most of the things they do and they do that together, they sort of work out how that's gonna happen. And then there's kind of, I kind of take the lead, it's my turn to take the lead and now it's your turn to take the lead, and we hope that we seam them together. I've been aware of bands where that's kind of, that's an amazing thing. You know, somebody takes the lead, and there's this really cool backup thing that happens, and then that backup person can just kind of

swell into taking over and that person is taking the lead and it's incredibly exciting, but it's like there are two sort of different approaches.

Julie Vallimont

I think that's true, kind of trading, whether you're trading whole times to the tune, or one person takes it twice and the next person takes a solo or whatever, versus the concept, Bare Necessities, the Bare Necessities concept of the passion graph, right? And having this arc that you're trying to accomplish during the arc of a dance.

Becky Tracy

Ha, the passion graph, I guess I'll have to listen to that particular episode.

Julie Vallimont

I talked with [Kate Barnes](#) but I'd like to talk to Jacqueline Schwab at some point, because I think maybe the idea came from her. But this is third hand, this is like someone told me that someone told them that someone told them that Jacqueline thought of this idea called the passion graph. But if you graph the energy of the dance on like an x-y axis, the shape that your line makes, so there's math, look, it's all coming together, like, are you gonna go up straight the whole time vertically? Are you going to kind of go up a little bit, I like the arc, where then it comes down a little bit at the end, and you end kind of gently and swell in the middle. A lot of bands, by accident, go up and then in the middle, they dip down again, by accident, like maybe their transition doesn't work and the next tune's not as good as the first one, or the dancers get tired. And then in the end, it shoots back up for the last time through, where you like, whoooooa I gotta play all the things, so you know, that concept? Where do you spend most of your time, musically? Like you talk about this two modes of being, either kind of trading, or arc.

Becky Tracy

I'm definitely in the arc camp. I think I'm more comfortable there. I'm more comfortable spending my time working, not having the audience see me blast through my stuff. But there are certain times when you're so motivated by the energy in the room that things happen, who knows what they are, but things happen.

Julie Vallimont

What kind of things?

Becky Tracy

You know, just lines, like your brain will think of a line over a tune and it's there, that kind of thing. Your fiddle is singing maybe a little too loud over the tune of the band.

Julie Vallimont

Sometimes magical ideas come that we don't even know we have in us, right? They just come out of that moment and they're amazing and perfect. If you save them up, collect them all, like you and Rachel do and harvest them for future times and work them into your arrangements, weave them in. How many metaphors can I throw in this sentence?

Becky Tracy

That's funny, it's really funny. Yeah, so did you get everything you wanted on the nuts and bolts of the band?

Julie Vallimont

Oh, come on, there's so many things we can talk about. You must know, not to be fangirly about this, but especially in the last few dances of Nightingale, like since then you know that there are people who have board recordings of Nightingale dances and we trade them around like Pokemon cards or something like really special.

Becky Tracy

There have been a couple of times where I've been places where young people are playing kind of the whole arrangement of something that Nightingale has done in the past that is not recorded. No, no, it's usually a jam session. I haven't heard it at a dance ever. The problem is I can't even remember what is the name of that tune? [Becky starts to sing Return to Camden Town]. But anyway, what is that tune? Anyway, there was this big arrangement for that particular tune in it, I think it showed up maybe on YouTube somewhere or something. I have heard people do Keith's exact piano, the whole thing.

Julie Vallimont

I remember my first piano lesson with Jeremiah. We started with basics, because I wanted to learn how he thought about accompaniment. But at the end, he's like, anything else you didn't do? I was like, can you just show me [the Nightingale tune] Flying Tent, please? Show me. Because, I told him, I used to take all these albums and slow them down and try to learn things at half speed and that was the one thing I couldn't figure out. I had a decent ear, I could not figure out for the life of me where his hands were when and how. And getting him to show me that, and I filmed the whole thing. It's in my archives, if anybody wants to pay me \$50 I'll sell you this. Just kidding. No, you could talk to Jerry about that, I'm sure he'll tell you. But something about the arrangements of Nightingale, they're so... they last, it's just quality stuff. This is why I'm a musician and I don't use words, because I don't have words for how great these arrangements are or else I would be a writer and not a musician. Where did you come up with tunes and repertoire and how did you decide to incorporate things like French music into your repertoire?

Becky Tracy

So we were each bringing whatever influences we had. Actually, like many people during the pandemic, I've been doing a lot of cleaning lately, and I have come across cassettes that say, tunes for Jerry, or tunes for Becky from Jerry. So each of us had our influences and the same is true with Wild Asparagus. Then there's the tune writers, Jeremiah and Keith in Nightingale wrote lots of material. And of course, David [Cantieni] is a big writer. I have contributed tunes to Wild Asparagus. And of course, Rachel Bell is an amazing writer in our band. The French thing in Nightingale at least was certainly Jeremiah's influence, at that time, because he had been delving into some of the French music. I don't know, you'll have to ask him for more about that.

But we were always just sharing the tunes that we knew. And it's like, yeah, there is this explosion of material where these tunes were going back and forth of what we had just known in the past. As time went on, people would be writing stuff and so we would be trying to incorporate those tunes more and more as Nightingale went on and the same is true in Asparagus. Asparagus has really taken on a lot of Keith tunes because of the whole Caribbean, that whole thing. Somehow that's been very inspiring for Keith to write tunes. David has happily jumped on board and I'm a little bit more reluctant to do that kind of group "we're gonna write a tune every day and then perform it every night." So that doesn't happen quite as much for me. Asparagus has really been happy to suck up those tunes that Keith has played, or composed.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, because you spend that time in [St. Croix](#) together every year.

Becky Tracy

It's kind of like a band retreat, in a way.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, another perk of being in a band with George Marshall as your caller.

Becky Tracy

Yeah, a retreat, both in the sense that there we are in this amazing place and a retreat in the sense that we're going off and writing tunes and then coming back and having to make them into music, into stuff for dancing right away.

Julie Vallimont

It's like an intensive or, having something to play every night and having free time enough in the day to write a tune. That doesn't happen necessarily, when you're at a dance weekend or on tour or something, depending on your schedule, being in one place for a week where you're just all with each other. That's a great environment to make music, you know?

Becky Tracy

Absolutely, and there's, you know, cocktails on the beach, with the new tune of the day.

Julie Vallimont

Doesn't hurt. That sounds fun. Sign me up, that's amazing.

Becky Tracy

Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

So, this question, I don't know how to ask this. I want to ask your approaches to making medleys but you've made so many different kinds of medleys in all of your bands there's not one particular formula. But what's your approach when you're putting tunes together?

Becky Tracy

What's our approach when putting tunes together?

Julie Vallimont

Or what are your many approaches. You know, like you've got some things where it starts out mellow, and then all of a sudden, bam, it hits you in the face, right, the transition?

Becky Tracy

Okay, so what is our approach? It's kind of funny, because in summary, it varies from band to band, because, of course, I'm not the only person. Everybody in the band has input into what they want, how they want a medley to go. One thing that is true, is that all the bands that I've been in have had kind of "types" of tunes. So, Asparagus doesn't play that many French Canadian tunes, but the other bands would have a French Canadian-esque sets of things and maybe smooth slinky jigs, but then maybe the more party chunky kind of jigs. So depending on what the caller was asking for, you'd know where to go look. And then in Nightingale we always had like, the enders, the big sets. There were a few of those and they were the ones in fact where you're talking about the pow, where something would happen and there would be a big change and all of a sudden you don't realize that it's three people on stage because Jeremiah's all over the piano, and there's this big mandolin thing and feet and all that stuff. Rachel and I, we have a section that we call headbanging French tunes. How do I describe this motion? Its head banging.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, Becky is actually head banging on the screen.

Becky Tracy

Back to the grunge. In Wild Asparagus we do kind of the same thing where we have the Irish reels and we have different kinds of sets of things. We have our one tune wonders. We have things that have the bombard. There's definitely different feels for different types of tunes. I'm trying to think. So how do we, as Wild Asparagus, decide that one tune sometimes is going to be it? And that's all you get. Because is it just because there's enough to say with that one tune? Or there's a groove that's compelling enough? Or you just don't want to change because it's so much fun to stick around with what you have in there, there's enough going on between maybe a riff and the tune itself, that you can just play with that. And you feel like that's a sort of a complete experience for the dancers. But then sometimes it's more like you're just playing tunes, you're just, you know, tune after tune so you might as well have three tunes.

Julie Vallimont

Especially with like the Irish tunes, I feel like that's the thing to do. I mean, that's the thing about Wild Asparagus is just this groove, this mood. Like you're in a place, it's like one concept, one dance and you just do the thing. Then there's the occasional pow, but the pow is like the bombard comes in instead of the entire arrangement changing, it's like a different way of doing some of the same things.

Becky Tracy

It's also true though, that Wild Asparagus is known for the dropping out. There's one time, you drop out, I mean, the backup band drops out, right? And you've got just fiddle and flute or maybe just fiddle, just flute, just something and then the band comes in, and it's something else, the rest of the band. That is one of the signature sounds, I think, of Wild Asparagus. There's the side of the groove, and you just stay with it through the whole dance and then there's that other side.

Julie Vallimont

A lot of these signature sounds are things that a lot of bands now kind of take for granted. But, there was a time when this was all new. And you know, before that, it was like: play tunes and harmonize with the tunes, perhaps and have medleys. And then all of a sudden, you have all these bold arrangement ideas kind of coming out of the woodwork.

Becky Tracy

Well, you know, that's the thing that's so amazing about contra dancing, and the contra dance music, is that it's so open to so many different ideas. There's people who are swingy in their approach, there's people who are very straight. And they're doing what you just described, the tune, and harmonies, and it's beautiful and fantastic dance music. There's super solid, beautiful oompah piano that keeps you right where you want to be. And then there's the grooves and the really inspired inventive piano styles that are out there. So it's open. The parameters are rhythm that you keep, really good rhythm, and you keep the dancers knowing where they are, somehow at least that's what I like. But within that parameter, you have so much freedom.

Julie Vallimont

Yes, the rhythm and the phrasing are there then you can do anything else you want. What did it sound like the first couple years when you were playing with Keith and Jeremiah? Did you start arranging everything from the beginning? Or were you more like playing tunes in the beginning and then kind of got into that?

Becky Tracy

We definitely started arranging from the beginning. The arrangements were simpler. And I think our recording, *The Coming Dawn* reflects that, it's a simpler sound. But also there was a purity of that, that was really beautiful. And yet, there was the kernel, there was always the kernel of arrangement, there was always the kernel of, you know, fussing a little bit, perfecting a little bit, creating, just making something a little bit different somehow.

Julie Vallimont

There's times when there's this element of minimalism where I feel like you're just playing only what you need to play. And Keith would do this really groovy piano, very repetitive riff for the tune to go on top of or something. Or just the feet being... like Keith's foot style being so constant and unchanging, is like this ground. And the arrangements, they just have what they need and they don't have a lot more than that necessarily. So it's like maximalism and minimalism sometimes. Right? With something like *Flying Tent*, you know, that arrangement?

Becky Tracy

A little bit of both, right? Yeah, for sure.

Julie Vallimont

Man, it's just so many ideas. When you have each band, with people with different backgrounds and ideas, and everyone brings ideas to the table... It's not like you're all making them up on the fly during rehearsal. You know, often somebody has: oh, I've been working on this riff and you bring it together. And maybe: oh, I've got this tune that goes with this riff and you try to put it together and then the synergy is how you take all these ideas and make them your own.

Becky Tracy

As a band, you mean?

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, as a band.

Becky Tracy

And it's very interesting how bands, they have their sound, you hear them and it's like, I know who that is.

Julie Vallimont

I feel like for a lot of contra bands, when we have what we call rehearsals, they're actually idea generating and medley generating sessions and arranging sessions. Very few bands actually rehearse, which is practice the things that they've already arranged. Because we all find that out when we go to the studio, and we're like, oh, this isn't tight. We've never figured out how we do this transition have we or whatever. Do you have bands that you have rehearsed with and practiced?

Becky Tracy

In fact, all of them.

Julie Vallimont

All of them, yeah.

Becky Tracy

Concerts are a really good motivator for rehearsals. Dances are less motivating. Because, as you say, it's like that idea generation. Maybe you get the beginning, middle and the end, figured out. But you kind of let the rest happen during a dance, but then when you want to put that in front of people who are sitting down and really, really paying attention it's a big motivator for actually rehearsing. And so all the bands have rehearsed probably because of that more than anything. There's recording, and there's concertizing that makes it happen. And then, of course, there's the once in a while you're in a recording session, and you go, whoops, this isn't quite right.

Julie Vallimont

Then what do you do?

Becky Tracy

Okay, I think we're gonna do this one tomorrow.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, let's break on this instead of spending our money in the studio rehearsing this right now and figuring out how it's gonna go, right? I mean, just like teaching is a good way to learn things and to reveal what you don't know. The best way to know what you don't know is to try to teach it, the best way to find out the little gaps in your arrangements or your technique is to try to record something because you will find out real quick the things you haven't figured out that you've been fudging this whole time.

Becky Tracy

Absolutely. In fact, I say to my students, I say it over and over again and really very few take me up on it. I say if you want to know how well you're doing on this tune, you should record yourself and listen back. I love it when somebody comes to me and says, oh my god, I just spent like an hour trying to record that tune for somebody.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, maybe the exercise isn't even only about the listening back. It's also the making yourself record the thing and then as you're playing it and focusing on it, you learn just through that and then also through the listening. I think bands should make demos before they make albums, just practice recording together and listening back to it. Because recording as a band is a skill, all in and of itself. Your album music will be better if you've already kind of got the skill out of the way before you get to the studio, right?

Becky Tracy

Yeah, but you know, going into the studio, time and again, you forget. Which is probably a good thing. You forget how much work it is.

Julie Vallimont

It's the only reason that lets us make more recordings.

Becky Tracy

Is that we forget, it's like having babies.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, exactly. You need to forget what childbirth is like so that you do it again. Right?

Becky Tracy

How much sleep you lost that first year.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, exactly. And you've made a solo recording?

Becky Tracy

Twenty years ago.

Julie Vallimont

Wow. Are you ever gonna do another one?

Becky Tracy

You know, it's funny. A couple years ago, I started to pen out what I thought I would do. I went on a little retreat. I tried a bunch of things, and I had a whole mess of ideas. But I think I might have lost a little confidence somewhere along the way. It's a big step, the making of a solo recording. I feel really great about [Evergreen](#). I feel like it's sort of stood the test of time, maybe that's a way to say it. But one thing about doing something like that, is that, then you feel like you want to at least meet that mark with your next one. I think it was the same thing with Keith and I making a duo album. After being with Nightingale all that time we started our duo album pretty soon after Nightingale broke up but it was hard to birth it. And I'm so glad we did but it took a lot of, sort of, [Becky makes a grunting sound like she's mustering strength] "err, okay".

Julie Vallimont

Was that at all affected by the fact, did you record that in your home studio so that you can kind of work on it whenever and however, which is a blessing and a curse.

Becky Tracy

Uh huh. Yes, ma'am. It's a blessing and a curse because you're not paying the big bucks. Paying the big bucks is really motivational, and that defined time of being in a studio is also motivational. Keith is amazing in that he is able, on his own, to plow through and do solo recording after solo recording in the studio, in our own little studio and just kind of do that. I'm really impressed with his ability to do that, pretty amazing.

Julie Vallimont

He seems quite focused.

Becky Tracy

He certainly can be.

Julie Vallimont

Your musical partnership with Keith is such an incredible thing. You know, it's lasted all these years through all these different settings. You've played together as a duo, I've seen you play for dances as a duo, and you've been on his albums, and he's been on your albums, and you've been in multiple bands together of different styles. What's that been like? I don't know, I don't have a sophisticated question for this except, that's cool.

Becky Tracy

Because we're kind of like, all in, right? We're family, you know, house, we're business partners, musical partners. We teach together, we do some classes together. Some of it is kind of also defining your own time in a way. Like, own time is healthy time. Right? Then you come back together, and you have at least a perspective on stuff because you're doing other stuff. And so during the pandemic, we've had less of that. So I have taken to big hikes and and he's become an exercise fanatic.

Julie Vallimont

I saw him running around Brattleboro not too long ago, a couple months ago when it was warm outside. I mean, that's important, right? Because you need to have your own experiences so that you have different things, just to do your own thing and be your own person. But then also that gives you new things to bring back to your musical relationship and new ideas and things like that.

Becky Tracy

It also gives perspective on appreciation for what we have, and what we do together and how well it works. But you do have to kind of go away from it too, or at least some of us do.

Julie Vallimont

It's like, if you're in a room that smells really good, like someone's cooking applesauce or something, after a while, you just smell applesauce, and you get kind of used to it, then you go outside for a walk. It's coming up on Thanksgiving, it's my favorite thing to do at Thanksgiving is go out for a walk in the cold air and come back and the house smells amazing. And you didn't notice it while you're in it, because you get used to it after a while but that first breath of this pumpkin pie smells incredible.

Becky Tracy

It's just like that, yes.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, Keith smells incredible. [Laughter]

Becky Tracy

Uh huh! [Laughter]

Julie Vallimont

How has your playing changed as you've gone through this musical journey with Keith and with your other bands? How's your playing changed over the years?

Becky Tracy

Oh, that's an interesting question that I have never thought about before. I think in some ways it has solidified. You know, and not, I don't mean in a bad way. I mean, you know, kind of like, it's

stronger. I guess back when I first started with Asparagus, I guess I could make a whole room of dancers dance alone. But now I feel confident in that ability. Yeah, I don't feel like I'm gonna fall off the tracks any second. Yeah. I also feel like I have been more confident in exploring other harmony, and exploring my own riffs. Like the idea of a duo, which is both what's happening with me and Keith and what's happening with me and Rachel at this moment in time, because of the pandemic, is that I feel more like I can bring my own ideas of backup or harmony into those. And I feel like I did it in the past, but without as much sense of: this is going to be okay.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, yeah. And you have an octave violin, am I remembering that right?

Becky Tracy

Yes, so now I have my octave violin, I've had it for maybe four years. And, so that's like a whole new voice. I'm really happy about that. I do use it for contra dancing a little bit. It's like a little coloration change. And it's so exciting. Like, those wind players who have... or even fiddle players who have like a mandolin, or, you know, some other instrument to play around with, you know, their toy. But I often think of wind players, of course, because I'm with David Cantieni, who has his saxophone and his flute and his whistles and his bombard and all kinds of toys to make different tambours. So it's really, it's fun to have a different chamber to mess around with. The octave violin is interesting, because some people, when they pick it up, a violin you know, somebody who's never played an octave violin, some people start playing it and they just think lyrical, beautiful, lyrical. And then other people who pick it up, and usually they are male and young, and they will just shred the heck out of it. And it's also fantastic. Yeah, not to put any stereotypes on these wonderful young people.

Julie Vallimont

You're allowed to see patterns. Well you know, it can do both things. And I think, you know, I feel like that's some of the magic of your playing is that you can do the most sublime beautiful, delicate thing and then on the other hand, you could just kind of bounce away on this, you know, Québécois tune with so much fire and passion, or this Irish reel and like, having all those extremes, like having that little crunch in your tone makes it so good for dancing, right? That little extra. Like when you're playing for dancing specifically as a fiddler, what kind of things are you thinking about? What are you watching on the floor?

Becky Tracy

I mean, I am not specifically watching for things. I'm aware of the dancers, and there's like that sense back and forth. But there's, I definitely pay attention to the dancers, both beforehand and while they're happening, in terms of picking tunes. Because I really want dancers to have this experience of it just really going together so great. Now, I know that when I'm dancing, I don't necessarily... sometimes I think it's the most amazing thing, but I've also had the experience of just dancing to a band that just plays New England tunes of whatever ilk for whatever dances come up, and boy, is it good.

Julie Vallimont

It's great.

Becky Tracy

However, you know, I have this bent, you know, this sort of focus, of making tunes match dances. And I think it might have started with Lisa Greenleaf, because she used to have a spreadsheet of all the sets that Nightingale played, and what the qualities were of those sets, and what dances they went with, what kinds of dances. And she had that because our sets were so varied, that she had the experience of things bombing. And so she decided that wasn't going to happen. So she made it so that didn't happen. And so then I started to pay attention to those ideas. And, I usually have a big hand in matching stuff to the dances that callers have chosen, whether it's a caller handing me the card before they start, or if they have the whole program lined up at the beginning, I can figure out, you know, what order we're gonna play our tunes in. And then if there's once in a while where a dance will happen, and maybe it's because the caller skipped a dance or we skipped a medley and so we're playing something that's completely not going with the dance. I really don't like that feeling.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, what do you do? It's kind of like, oh, you're stuck there. Do you try to change?

Becky Tracy

Usually I sit with discomfort for a little bit to see if it's actually okay. Yeah. Because usually it's fine.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. And it's often drastic to try to change something.

Becky Tracy

Uh huh.

Julie Vallimont

You know, I feel like it has to be really bad to try to bail on the original thing.

Becky Tracy

I don't think I've ever bailed. But I have felt the heat rising in my throat, watching.

Julie Vallimont

I remember talking to Lisa about programming with Nightingale, because you know, I was in Nor'easter, Nor'easter was a new band. And it was the kind of band where callers were starting to give us their programs in advance. And we were programming in advance to their things. And I asked Lisa what she did with Nightingale? She said, well, usually, now I just started asking them to give me the program. And then I matched the dances to their musical program. But with with like, a musical, kind of with those kinds of arrangements, they flow into each other in different ways. It kind of makes the most sense after a while to do it that way.

Becky Tracy

Right. Plus, she knew our music that well. Yeah, that she could do that really easily.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, yeah. And, you know, she's a flexible caller with a lot of dances in her repertoire and doesn't necessarily have an agenda for the evening of ooh, I need to call this particular new dance that I just wrote, or whatever, you know. And so it's just, it's uncommon for a caller and a band to work that way. But it's cool. It can have a really cool effect because now the whole dance is an arrangement, like in a good way, right? It's like all those details. And you know, then the band can be at their best and the caller can be at their best and the dancers are going to have a great time and it's kind of a neat experience. You know.

Becky Tracy

You know who else has done that is Sue Rosen. I've worked with her where she said, "Okay, what do you want to play next?"

Julie Vallimont

It's fun when that happens, because like, often you have an instinct of like, Oh, I think we should do a beautiful jig right now. I don't always like planning things far in advance, because my instincts in the moment are not always what they were over dinner that night. But in the moment, the right thing will usually pop into somebody's head. I love it when the caller is like, oh, I was also thinking beautiful jigs are perfect, our sense of flow is exactly in line. I love working with callers when our instincts tend to line up like that and then we can just be in the moment, but it's like we're planning ahead together. But in the moment, if that makes any sense.

Becky Tracy

Yes, it does make sense. Totally.

Julie Vallimont

When you're matching tunes to dances, what are the kind of things you're looking for?

Becky Tracy

Well, of course, I look for the balances. What's that essential feel? Does it feel like it's, you know, got lots of balances, or does it feel like it's lots of walking. And, you know, that's like, the essence of it. And then going on from there. You know, there's certainly other things you for sure. But, those are the essences. You know, like, okay, I'm thinking you can kind of put it into two camps. Lots of balances, or it's kind of smooth and walk-y. And I love it when somebody will say, okay, this one really needs a party tune, or I like this feel to this particular dance. Yeah. And then you go through your setlist and you think about what would be a good fit. Exactly. Yeah. Steve Zakon-Anderson felt like that. He had to have a whole little pile of dances with B1 balances for Nightingale. That was a thing.

Julie Vallimont

I mean, it is unsatisfying if the tune really drives to the B1 like there's a nice IV chord on B1 or something and then the dance doesn't do anything. It's a little unsatisfying. So I could see that.

Becky Tracy

Right. And of course, it's not just the balances. But where are those balances? That's a main feature. Because certain tunes ask for balances in different places or certain arrangements, you know, what the band is doing, ask for balances in different places.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. Did you ever feel like you had some arrangements that were complex enough that it could throw off the dancers if you weren't careful about how you paired them with the dance?

Becky Tracy

Now wait a minute. I know... if we, if we didn't pair it well with the dance, I know that that's true because of what Lisa said. But that's from a really, really, really long time ago so I'm only taking it on faith. The only time I really know that we screwed up a dance was when Keith wrote a tune once in the Caribbean, and he thought it was straight and it was crooked.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, well, hello.

Becky Tracy

And so we couldn't figure out why the dancers were always moving.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, that's funny.

Becky Tracy

So then he fixed the tune, but he called the tune the Missing Beat.

Julie Vallimont

Yes, right. Because you had to take one out or add one in depending on ...

Becky Tracy

I think there was a missing beat originally, I think that's what it was.

Julie Vallimont

A crooked tune can feel so normal if it's like a good crooked tune and it just says what it needs to say. You don't even notice!

Becky Tracy

Right. Keith has certainly written those tunes that have that feel of being crooked, but they're actually straight. So there's certain tunes that are a little bit wild, but they come out in the end.

Julie Vallimont

How do New England tunes fit into your repertoire?

Becky Tracy

How do they fit in? That's a really good question. I love them. How's that for a start?

Julie Vallimont

That's a great start.

Becky Tracy

I totally love New England tunes. It feels like something I can always come back to. I work on them. I actually don't play a lot of them out because of some of the keys. But I always love them and some people don't. Some people who think of me like, playing with Nightingale, playing with Wild Asparagus like [fancy] bands, that I'm not actually into the sort of old New England repertoire, but I am. If you asked me, or you did in fact, one of your prompts was, what's a favorite tune. Opera Reel comes to the forefront of my brain, as like, a tune I could always... I could just always play the Opera Reel and be a happy person. It's just a great tune, and it's great for dancing.

Julie Vallimont

I love that tune. It's so beautiful, and has a great storyline. Just a great tune.

Becky Tracy

I have to say, I think with the people that I have bands that I'm working with, for the most part, we play other stuff, and maybe a token New England tune. But there was a period where Wild Asparagus went through this phase for maybe a couple of years, where every dance, we would have one to one set of tunes where we just created on the fly and the rule was... it's like a game. The rule was it had to be some New England tunes thrown together and that was always wickedly fun.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, stay in touch with your roots. What are the some of the tunes that might make an appearance during a set like that?

Becky Tracy

Lamplighters might show up. Fisher's Hornpipe, in F because I like it in F, only because I like it in F. What else might show up? I don't think Forester's would show up even though I love playing that tune. Sometimes Allie Crocker with it sort of played AABB instead of ABB. Batchelder's.

Julie Vallimont

Another nice F tune.

Becky Tracy

Quindaro. Lots of tunes.

Julie Vallimont

It's interesting, I ask so many musicians, or fiddlers even, what do you think about New England tunes? A lot of people say, well, I love them but we don't play them very often for contra dances. Or I love them, but my band doesn't play them. It's like that seems to be a phenomenon. I don't know if it's that they don't fit as well to the kind of arrangement treatments that bands want to do with them or they don't have sexy chords or their melodies are simpler or different, or...

Becky Tracy

I don't know about the melodies being simpler or different.

Julie Vallimont

Because I think some of them are elaborate and beautiful.

Becky Tracy

Sometimes the chords are actually a lot. There's a lot to them sometimes. I think some bands get a direction, the band becomes defined in a certain way. So there are bands, Old New England, that define themselves as we are a New England band. But, Wild Asparagus went through a phase before my time when they had Kerry Elkin playing and he kind of shaped the direction of the band into a more Irish vein. The band has since taken some detours. But they had started in a very, very New England roots, like their roots were serious New England roots. And Kerry kind of pushed them in that direction. And of course, for David who plays the flute, that's pretty attractive. Those Irish tunes are very attractive and I was playing Irish music, so I fit right into that. I think sometimes a band has just sort of its defining characteristic. And maybe we haven't, like in workshops pushed those New England tunes as much. I know at NHMC, which is [Northeast Heritage Music Camp](#), which we affectionately call "NaHumka", because anyway ... This past time, we had this lovely New England... whole session on favorite New England tunes. It was great and nobody knew them. They didn't know them, they were so happy to learn these New England tunes. There were people there that I thought, oh, no, I'm going to bring up a tune and these people are going to know it for sure. They didn't. It was fun. I think we did like four tunes or something.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, we gotta keep those tunes around. It's just an interesting thing to explore.

Becky Tracy

But there's also places where the New England tunes are rebounding and very happy. For instance, in the Belfast, Maine region, there's a kitchen junket of Maine tunes and New England tunes, and they're really happy to play those old tunes anytime.

Julie Vallimont

The whole Maine fiddle Camp scene, there's so many different genres of fiddle styles at Maine Fiddle Camp. But New England, I feel like that's one of the few places where New England

fiddle tunes are treated on the same level as the Irish tunes and the Scottish tunes and Cape Breton tunes and the old time tunes, and they're just as cool. Did you ever feel in a performing setting, like if you're touring and you're a band from New England, did you ever feel like New England tunes are perceived as being less cool when you're traveling? Versus like Irish tunes or French tunes or things like that?

Becky Tracy

It's funny, because I haven't. I haven't thought about that.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I mean, it's a weirdly leading question. I'm not trying to imply that people think New England tunes are less cool. But I'm just trying to sort out in my head why so many contra bands love New England tunes and don't play them. I think it's like, you can grow up as an Irish fiddler, or you go to Irish sessions or French Canadian sessions, but there aren't a lot of New England sessions. In most of the country, in New Hampshire or Massachusetts or like David Kaynor's dances, there are lots of places where those things could happen. But maybe it's just not an identity that a lot of fiddlers grew up with because maybe there's no, like, Natalie MacMaster of New England tunes. Some people it's like Riverdance was their first exposure to Irish music, but whatever it is, that turns you on to a certain fiddle style maybe that doesn't happen for New England tunes in the same way. I don't know.

Becky Tracy

So there is this phenomenon of Celtic, the word Celtic with its fancy C and everything, it has a real ... There's definitely the mainstream person knows what you're talking about. But New England fiddle tunes, even though I live in Vermont, and people hear fiddle music, the average New Englander isn't really going to associate with what that means. Maybe in the past, they did, because there used to be the fiddle contest, that used to be a big thing all over the place. There used to be a lot more of those happening and people going out to them. I think fiddle music, people would identify more with that. Okay, so I'm actually looking a little bit more broadly, but I think it affects our musicians as well. I'm looking at the populace in general and you're looking at why do bands not play so much New England tunes, but I'll tell you this, Asparagus has been getting together, not to rehearse, but to play tunes lately, and the tunes we've been playing have been a lot of New England tunes. We mix it up. It's this big slice of kind of Wild Asparagus from its roots to the present. It's sort of like a game in that we each get to choose whatever it is that we want to play, and we're allowed to start any tune that we want to start and those New England tunes have been showing up a lot.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. They're fun to play. They feel good when you play them.

Becky Tracy

Yeah. And some of them like the Irish American Reel feel good when you finally get them.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I mean, there's finger twisters there for sure, those squirrely tunes in the New England feeling repertoire. So do you have any thoughts about the future of contra dance music as a living tradition? You've seen it change so much over the decades, where do you think it might go? What are your thoughts on tradition?

Becky Tracy

My experience, right? I'm just going back a little bit. I'm going back to look at what my experience with the New England contra dance music has been or contra dance music. I've seen that it seems to have, there's always bands that are sort of really rooted in the old. And then there's bands that are trying out all kinds of things. What do I think about the future? I'm going to be a very interested bystander, but I do think that probably we'll have some bands rooted in the old and then other bands, taking in whatever, from either mainstream, or other influences there are, and creating new cool stuff for us to dance to.

Julie Vallimont

And they're both good. Did you ever, like, think about tradition, or worry about whether something was traditional or not when you were thinking of arrangements or trying out new things?

Becky Tracy

Before, before starting up with Nightingale and Wild Asparagus, the bands that I was playing with were far more traditional for the most part, with maybe a tune or two thrown in from players of the band and that's as untraditional as we got. When I joined these other bands, I was kind of the one who maybe even knew the least about contra dancing. I mean, I went contra dancing, but I didn't even necessarily know all the bands. I had been to Swallowtail once. I had never been to a Wild Asparagus contra dance in my life before I joined the band. So I wasn't necessarily in the know and I think I was following the lead of other members of the band, who are far more experienced than I was. In some ways I had experience, I grew up dancing, I had lots of experience. But in other senses, I didn't really know the scene as it was, at the time, the big scene, so I didn't think about that. And do I think about it now? Like, is it traditional enough? No, I don't think about it now. No, I don't I don't think about that. I want it to be good for dancing.

Julie Vallimont

That's a living tradition, is that you don't have to think about it. But keeping that essence of having it be good for dancing, to me, maybe that's the traditional part, right? Is that it just still has to serve the purpose. But your music brings joy to lots of people in so many different forms. It's just amazing. This has been so wonderful to talk to you. Is there anything else that you want to talk about?

Becky Tracy

Is there anything I want to talk about? Is there anything that needs to be talked about? I just want to say there was one thing about talking about venues, places that we've played, you had that prompt, like, is there any favorite place? I thought about how amazing it is that I get to go to the Caribbean every year and play there. There's a sea breeze. I mean, it's incredible to play

in the Caribbean. But you know what, there's nothing like playing in the Guiding Star Grange at your home dance with your home people. It's an incredible feeling. I think that's the one thing I wanted to say. Because I was sparking. I was thinking about all these sort of amazing things, places that I've been able to go and people I have been able to play for and wonderful communities that I've been able to go back to and play for them. It's all incredible. But then coming home is really wonderful and I really look forward to that, to playing there. Especially again.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's gonna be amazing. That feeling of home, that home dance, what an amazing hall and space to be your home dance. So great. So many things have happened in that hall, the floor and the walls and the ceiling are steeped with memories and energy and everything else.

Becky Tracy

Yeah, a favorite thing of mine to do is to go and like find Ray Sebold's various videos that he has in that hall from various times. It just brings me back, before they redid the walls.

Julie Vallimont

And when they still had that mural on the back of the stage.

Becky Tracy

Yeah. I loved that.

Julie Vallimont

I loved the mural, it's so beautiful now, the stage is gorgeous. But there is this kind of quaint folksiness about that mural. It made it easier to sit on stage and watch, which is one of the things I loved about that hall. It's one of the few places where you could sit on stage behind the band and kind of hang out and that was okay. And something about the folksy mural made it easier to do that, it didn't feel too fancy. It's a very welcoming spirit. But of course, the hall is gorgeous and wonderful and welcoming now in a different way.

Becky Tracy

Exactly. Accessible.

Julie Vallimont

Yes. It is accessible. Yes, they put in wheelchair lifts and I've watched a few people using them, including myself. How can a dance feel like your home dance if you can't get to it? Accessibility is such an important part of building a community. It's necessary and that's also great. Kudos.

Becky Tracy

Yes, definitely. Okay, well, this has been delightful. Thank you, Julie.

Julie Vallimont

Well, thank you so much Becky. It has been so wonderful to talk to you. Thank you for being on Contra Pulse.

Becky Tracy

You are very welcome. It's my pleasure.

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