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Contra Pulse Episode 40 – Dave Langford

Julie Vallimont

Hello and welcome to Contra Pulse, this is Julie Vallimont. This episode, I sit down with Dave Langford. Dave is a long time New England dance fiddler and guitarist who has performed all over New England, the United States and beyond. He combines multiple styles of fiddling with fierce energy and drive. Dave helped to found and has been an integral part of numerous diverse bands, including Les Z Boys, Big Bandemonium, The Latter Day Lizards and Stomp Rocket. For 20 years Dave also performed with the mega fiddle band Childsplay, after purchasing his fiddle from Bob Childs in 1987. He started fiddle at the relatively late age of 18, and then mixed university based classical training with workshops and lessons, including attending weeks at the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshop in Elkins WV where he was smitten with Irish, Old Time and French Canadian music.

Julie Vallimont

In our conversation, Dave tells us of his teenage years in Connecticut where he learned to square dance and met Ralph Sweet, and how his Journey as a fiddle player began with a spur of the moment impulse to buy a fiddle that he saw on the wall of a music shop. He tells stories from the days of Big Bandemonium and Childsplay, and we talk about some of the creative process behind his various bands. We explore his identity as a New England style Fiddler, and the way that he has combined multiple fiddling influences to create his unique style. As a bonus, Dave plays fiddle and guitar throughout to demonstrate his playing style, including his special fiddle strum, and plays a few tunes for us. Hope you enjoy!

Julie Vallimont

Well hello, Dave Langford and welcome to Contra Pulse.

Dave Langford

Hi, Julie. I'm so happy to see you.

Julie Vallimont

Happy to see you as well. Where are you right now? Are you at home in Arlington [Massachusetts]?

Dave Langford

I'm at home in Arlington.

Julie Vallimont

We just had Thanksgiving. How was your holiday?

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Dave Langford

Holiday was was very good. Very quiet.

Julie Vallimont

Did you used to play dances around Thanksgiving? I saw on Facebook a lot of nostalgia for the night before Thanksgiving dance and things like that.

Dave Langford

Yeah, there were a few different events that happened before Thanksgiving. One specifically, I remember was Steve Zakon-Anderson would always do something in Peterborough. I think that was the night before Thanksgiving.

Julie Vallimont

So fun. Steve likes to call and he likes to cook and he likes to organize dances so maybe Thanksgiving is one of his favorite holidays. You get everything all in one. I know you as a fiddler, and from when I used to live in the Boston area, but I would just love to start from the very beginning as to how you got started playing fiddle and how you ended up playing for contra dances. I think of you as someone who's been in a lot of different kinds of bands over the years, a wide variety.

Dave Langford

Absolutely.

Julie Vallimont

You know, like the [Latter Day Lizards](#) and [Les Z Boys](#) I remember seeing a few times but then also [Childsplay](#). I was just reminiscing about [Big Bandemonium](#). I used to dance to Big Bandemonium all the time. Such a fun band.

Dave Langford

That was an amazing band, it was amazing to be part of.

Julie Vallimont

And now you have [Stomp Rocket](#).

Dave Langford

Indeed.

Julie Vallimont

With [Glen Loper](#) and [Bethany Waickman](#) from Maine.

Dave Langford

Another wonderful band. I saw those guys last weekend. We got together and spent the day playing. We have a little project we're working out. I won't say a lot about it but we had a great day working together.

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Julie Vallimont

Oh, that's so exciting. I miss them. I'm jealous, [laughter] jealous of how you come up with tunes and what it sounds like and what your project's gonna be. But, no spoilers, we'll have to wait to find out together what it is.

Dave Langford

That's right.

Julie Vallimont

So how did it all begin?

Dave Langford

So it all started really before I was born. When my mom was pregnant with me, my parents went to the New England Folk Festival so I was there actually before I was even born. And in those days also my mom and dad were going to [Ralph Sweet's Powder Mill Barn](#) in Hazardville [CT] and taking square dance lessons. And then once the kids started coming, and there's three of us, they really got out of that and they didn't do very much of that. Although, when we were growing up, we used to go to the house of a guy named Chet Case who had dances in his basement. It was very informal. He was a caller and I think it was recorded music. In his basement there was a pillar every six feet so the dancing was challenging, but it was very fun. Dick Tracy, who was Becky Tracy's dad, was part of that scene as well. So Becky and I figured that we were probably there at the same time. Although we were both kids and Becky's younger than me, so we don't remember each other but it's both something we remember doing as kids. So the next thing that happened for me in terms of music and dance was I got involved in a teen square dance club in South Windsor, Connecticut, which is where I lived during high school. There were five towns that formed this teen square dance group. And it was all teenagers, there were no adults involved, except for the caller, who was a guy named Don Swift who loved our group. He loved that teenagers wanted to square dance. He was a fantastic guy, he was a great caller. Once again, all recorded music. We learned all the standard square dance moves, including dip and dive and some advanced square dance moves. Very occasionally, he couldn't make it, and he would get a substitute caller, and so that's the first time I met Ralph Sweet. He would come and call for our teen square dance club, which, I'm not sure if I said, was called the Five Village Teens. So, before that time, I actually started playing trumpet when I was about nine, and I played trumpet for a number of years and played in band and marching band and stuff like that. When I was about 13, I started playing guitar and then I started to sing, and I got together with another guy, and we would go and do coffee houses and different kinds of small folk venues as a duo. And then when I was 18, and I was out of high school, I was working at a factory job before I went to college. I was in a music store and I was there with some friends. We were killing time before we were doing something else. I looked at this wall where there was a fiddle hanging and I walked up to it, and I looked at the price tag, and it was 50 bucks. So I looked at my wallet and I actually had 50 bucks and change. So just on impulse for almost no reason that I can think of I bought this fiddle. It's not something I had been thinking about doing. It was just kind of spur of the moment, I just said, I'm going to buy this thing. The guys that are

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with me are all like, what are you doing? I said, well, I'm just buying this fiddle and they thought it was pretty funny. So then I started, you know, I didn't know anything. I already knew how to play guitar, how to play trumpet, I could read music. So I went to a local fiddler, whose name was Will Welling and started taking some lessons from him. And then he moved away from Connecticut and I started taking lessons from his partner, Bill Wallach, who's a mandolin player. And then I met a guy named Max Kabrick, who came to my parent's house to tune the piano. And he saw my fiddle case in the corner and he said, whoa, what do you got there? And I said, well, that's a violin, And he said, oh, can I see? We opened it up and he strummed it a little bit, and then he took it apart and put it back together and it sounded way better. I thought, wow, this guy's pretty cool. He said, Well, you know, if you want to take some lessons come to my shop and I can teach you some things. And so I did take some lessons with him. He mostly taught kids so we played out of these intermediate violin books, like Wohlfahrt, so that was great. I learned a lot from him. At that point, I started going to school at the the Ward College, which is part of the University of Hartford and I started taking lessons with a guy named Abraham Mishkind, who was a concert master in the Hartford symphony and classical violin teacher and taught at the Hartt School of Music at the University of Hartford. I studied with him for a couple years and learned a lot. I was still also learning fiddle tunes and playing some with Bill Wallach. And also during that time I started going to contra dances. I went to a dance where Ralph Sweet was calling and I happened to have my fiddle case, because I'd just had a lesson or something. He saw my fiddle case and said, "Oh, you play the fiddle?" I said, yep. And he said, "Well, do you want to come out to my barn and play with my band some night?" I said, "Yeah, sure, that sounds great." And so I started working with Ralph and he liked to work with young players who weren't very developed, because he wanted you to play a certain way. And so he liked to be able to kind of mold what you were doing. I worked with him quite a bit for many years, just doing dances at the barn, and then all over Connecticut and that was fantastic. During that time, actually, he hired me to do a dance. He said, there's gonna be a couple of people there, Ann playing piano and George playing flute. and I said, okay. When we got there, I realized that Ann was Ann Percival, who I grew up with in East Granby, Connecticut, before we moved to South Windsor. We hadn't seen each other since I moved away from East Granby. And so I walked in and there was Ann Percival. So that was a really fun reunion. And George was George Reynolds, who's a great flute player, and old time fiddle player, too. So anyway, getting back to the the whole narrative of learning to play, after University of Hartford, a couple years there in electronics school, I worked as a technician for about a year, an electronics technician, and I was continuing to play. I had this feeling that I just wanted to be a better fiddle player. And I thought, unless I really focus on this, and really dedicate myself to it, I don't think I'm going to get there. So I came up with this plan to go to the University of Connecticut, because my girlfriend was there. They've got a pretty good music department. I went there and I auditioned for music school. I auditioned for a cellist, and a violist and played the Accolay Violin Concerto [No. 1 in A Minor] and played it really terribly, because I never got anywhere really with classical violin, despite a fair amount of study, just really from starting so late. They listened to me play for a while, and then they kind of stopped me and they said, how long have you been playing the violin? And I said, oh, three years, and they said, well, you've got some spirit, okay. So I actually spent a year as a music student at the University of Connecticut, studied with somebody named [Theodore Arm](#), who is a wonderful player and teacher. I took music history

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and music theory and ear training, played in quartets and played in the orchestra, it was just fantastic. My plan was to do it for maybe a year or two years and then switch back into engineering and that's what I did. So I did it for one year and then I enrolled in the School of Engineering at University of Connecticut and got a degree in computer science hardware and software. Then after that, I moved to Boston and I kept at it, I just kept playing. In one tour that I did, I did down south with this caller Jim Gregory and a couple other players. I ran into somebody who told me about the Augusta Heritage Arts workshop in Elkins, West Virginia, and he said, you really should go to Augusta and I said, why? He said, no, don't worry about it, just go and he gave me a phone number. I called them up and I ordered a catalog and they sent me this catalog and I looked through it. Augusta was having different themed weeks all summer long. I saw one week was called Dance Week and I thought, wow, I like to dance, that sounds good. Another week was called Irish Week, I didn't really know anything about Irish music, but I thought that sounded pretty fascinating. The teacher was somebody called [Liz Carroll](#) that I had never heard of. There were two weeks in a row. And so I went to Elkins, West Virginia, and did these two weeks, Dance Week and Irish Week back to back. It was an amazing time. I learned a ton about Irish fiddling from Liz, who is an inspired teacher, and had a big group class. Maybe 40 people or something like that came to work on Irish fiddle with her. In subsequent years, I went back to Augusta a couple times, one for a week with Pete Sutherland, also incredible, really focused on old time music, and then another in 1988 for a week with [Johnny Gimble](#), who's an amazing swing fiddle player, kind of legendary swing fiddle player. Augusta was an incredible place to go, there was a lot of amazing stuff going on at the time in the 1980s. I think my philosophy about it is that you always just have to keep learning, right? Just never stop absorbing new things. I was lucky enough to have some workshops and private lessons with [Bruce Molsky](#) at one point. Also that was probably more more like the 1990s. So that's really, that's kind of how I got into it.

Julie Vallimont

Was the first contra dance you played through Ralph Sweet at his barn?

Dave Langford

I think so. Yep. I think that's right. Yes.

Julie Vallimont

How did you get involved in the dance scene in the Boston area when you moved there?

Dave Langford

Well, that's a good question.

Julie Vallimont

Do you remember?

Dave Langford

It was a long time ago. I did meet some musicians. I think I just found out about dances that were happening. So, at the time there was a Thursday dance at the VFW in Cambridge and

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there was a Monday dance at the Scout House in Concord. I think I read about those, and I went to those and I started meeting people. I met some musicians and started getting together and playing with different people and actually started forming a few bands, some of which had some staying power and some of which, you know, not so much. I do remember one band called the Minor Planets, which I think maybe did one gig at the VFW which included Dave Surette, Sam Bartlett, Kate Barnes and Larry Unger.

Julie Vallimont

Wow, that's a fun group of people right there.

Dave Langford

That was a cool one night stand band. I also had another band with Larry Unger and Sarah Seward, who's a guitar player, mandolin player and that band was called the Nashtones and played around quite a bit during that time. I also played with Debby Knight and Jack O'Connor a bunch. I think there's actually some YouTube video of us playing for some dance near the Constitution, that ship in Boston Harbor with a dance group. I also remember going to New Year's Eve parties where Kate Barnes lived in Winchester and got to be good friends with Kate, which eventually led to the formation of the Latter Day Lizards, which was more like 1997 when that happened. I was also doing a bunch of playing with Bill Tomczak, he had a third Friday dance in Greenfield. And so we would do that, many times it was with Mary Cay Brass, I think that group was called Mosaic. Well, so something happened in the early 1990s which put a stop to everything for a while, which is that I had quit my job to really focus on music, and I was playing a lot of guitar. I developed tendinitis in my left arm, left forearm. I had to basically cancel all my gigs, and I wasn't able to play for the next year and a half.

Julie Vallimont

Wow. So that's the hand that you fret the chords with?

Dave Langford

Exactly. Yeah. It was a really challenging time. People still remember it and still ask me about it. They'll say, Oh, how's your tendinitis doing? I'll say, well, I haven't had any trouble since about 1993. But it was a really big deal at the time. I mean, it was really tough. I did try many, many different sort of cures, you know, icing and heating and Ibuprofen, and I went to see a lot of different doctors. For many months I didn't use it at all, I just had it in a sling. Early on, I got some acupuncture, and that didn't seem to help. Later on, like, a year later, I went to a new doctor and that doctor said, Well, have you tried acupuncture? And I said, yeah, it was quite a while ago. And he said, Well, acupuncture is better for chronic problems and you should really try it again. So I went to an acupuncturist that I knew, I was friends with her family. It cured me completely in over a period of about three months.

Julie Vallimont

That's incredible.

Dave Langford

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Just really amazing, so I started with this level of pain that was in my forearm for a year and then as she treated me, the pain just lessened and lessened very steadily until it was just gone.

Julie Vallimont

Was that affecting your other daily life activities too?

Dave Langford

Very much so because I had quit my job as a computer programmer. I found some work for a guy that made muffler software. And all he wanted me to do was read the programs and find problems with them so I didn't have to do any typing. So that was great. I also learned to use voice recognition software a bit as well. So yeah, that was a challenging time. When I very first started playing fiddle again after being injured, I learned to play just touching the strings, I didn't press the strings at all. I played like that for something like three months and it sounds terrible because you're not pressing the strings. It just sounds like bad harmonics, you know, or something. It was a great way to start. Then I just started pressing a little harder and a little harder until I was pressing just hard enough and I kept it there. It actually improved my fiddle playing quite a bit to have that little lighter touch. People who heard me play after not playing for a long time would say, You sound better, how is that? You haven't been playing. I believe it was kind of learning to play again with a very light touch. When I went back to guitar I started playing DADGAD because you can play in DADGAD using kind of less fingers, you don't have to do barre chords.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, for our listeners, DADGAD is D, A, D, G, A, D tuning and it has a lot of open strings and basically almost any shape sounds kind of good. Doing barre chords and standard tuning can be hard on the hands at least it was for me. In DADGAD the shapes are easier. You don't have to fret as many strings at once and you don't have to contort your hand into all these weird positions unless you want to, you certainly can if you want to and people do, but you don't have to. Right?

Dave Langford

Exactly. And so there's one finger chords and two finger chords that all sound fantastic. So you can do a lot and kind of use very little of your hand muscles. And since I was worried about re-injury I just really wanted to take it easy for for a while.

Julie Vallimont

Did it change your guitar playing for dances when you switched from standard to DADGAD? Does it change the way you think about chords and harmony?

Dave Langford

Yeah, it does. It certainly does. I mean, because in DADGAD, there's a lot of harmonies that just come from how the strings are tuned. There's a lot of interesting chord tones that work their way into more standard chords. I think it definitely did change how I play guitar for dances.

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Julie Vallimont

I mean, that's certainly a sound that's very common in Irish music these days but not so much in old time music. There are a lot of contra musicians who play DADGAD guitar or standard, it's like they're both welcome in contra dancing, because we're sort of a cross genre tradition.

Dave Langford

Absolutely. Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

So glad you recovered. I mean, there are so many musicians who get repetitive use injuries, and some of them are from music. Some of them just happen in the rest of their life. I think there's also a lot of overlap between contra dance musicians or callers and people who do computer science or typing kind of activities and other things. So there have been folks who have overuse injuries related to being at a computer all day that then affects their ability to play.

Dave Langford

I had one computer job where we were using a piece of software where the interface was almost all mousing. I injured my right wrist doing that, I'm right handed, but I switched to mousing with my left hand and I still mouse left handed today.

Julie Vallimont

Wow. Save your right hand. That would be hard at first. But you know, there are people who have injured their hands and then have had to learn to play fiddle backwards or guitar backwards and re-taught themselves to play fiddle the other way, you know?

Dave Langford

Very true. So that was early 1990s. And I think to kind of continue...

Julie Vallimont

Yes. Onward, we still have a lot of your life left. We haven't even cracked the surface yet.

Dave Langford

There you go. So continue the chronology, in the 90s, well, Childsplay started in 1988. That was the first Childsplay concert that I participated in. It was maybe the second one that ever happened and that was in the Boston area and there were 13 fiddle players. So for those folks that have not heard of Childsplay, Childsplay is an ensemble made up of a lot of people who play fiddles made by [Bob Childs](#), who lived in Cambridge at that time, lives in Arlington now. Bob has made quite a large number of fiddles and the group Childsplay has gone up and down in size over the years. So that first year 1988, first year in Boston anyway, there was 13 fiddlers. And at its zenith I think Childsplay had 24 fiddlers, and also maybe 10 or 12 backup musicians including piano, guitar, a couple of cellos, and including some dancers. They put on these kind of massive shows with 30 plus people, and people doing sound and lights and a stage manager. And so Childsplay was, for a while, a very large enterprise. But it was a really wonderful thing to be part of. There's lots of fantastic and amazing musicians that I got to play with over many

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years of doing Childsplay. One year we went to Sweden, and we played at the [Falun Folk Music Festival](#) in Falun, Sweden, and got to hear lots of fantastic Swedish fiddling and got to know some great fiddlers. Some of those fiddlers, like half a dozen, came back and did concerts with us the next year. So, there was a lot of really amazing things that happened over the years. I did Childsplay for about 20 years. Around 2007 or so I stopped doing it, because it just got to be too much with my work schedule. But it was a wonderful thing to be part of, Childsplay made a number of recordings and I played on a couple of those. That was really fun.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, so somewhere along the line, you clearly made the switch from your \$50 fiddle to a Bob Childs fiddle at some point.

Dave Langford

I did, that was 1987. Bob actually made that fiddle for somebody else. I was at his house one day, and he had just finished it and it had dried and he said Dave, you want to try this new fiddle I just made. I said okay, and I played it, and it blew me away. I said if for whatever reason this person that ordered this fiddle doesn't buy it, then I will buy it, you've got a buyer. So that actually came to pass, the other person didn't end up taking it and I met Bob for lunch one day and gave him a check and he gave me the fiddle and it's a wonderful instrument. I think it has a low sonority. It kind of has a dark sound and a beautiful low end. Occasionally people will come up to the stage and say, who's playing viola up here? I really love it. I think in the first 10 years that I played I probably had 8 or 10 fiddles. As you get better you want a better instrument, so I kept trading up and trading up. Then when I got this fiddle from Bob that was it for me.

Julie Vallimont

So this fiddle has been your companion for a long time.

Dave Langford

Absolutely.

Julie Vallimont

What the adventures it has had. I'm sure it would have a lot of stories to tell.

Dave Langford

It's traveled the world for sure.

Julie Vallimont

And done all sorts of crazy things. How did you know Bob? Sounds like you knew him before you bought one of his fiddles.

Dave Langford

I did well, and I don't remember exactly how I met Bob.

Julie Vallimont

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That's kind of how the scene works.

Dave Langford

Yeah, exactly. It was just all of the different folks that were involved with the scene at that time. Yeah, I don't remember exactly how we met.

Julie Vallimont

So let's talk a little bit about your fiddle style. Because I think of you as someone who plays lots of different kinds of music, including for English country dance, not even like contra dance tunes, you know, you play a little old timey, you play a little Irish, you play whatever else is on the menu. What is your home style? How do think about your fiddle style?

Dave Langford

I think I'm a New England style fiddle player. That's how I think of myself. But I think part of being a New England style fiddle player for dances is that you gravitate toward lots of different styles. In the 1980s Yankee Ingenuity was playing Monday night dances [at the Concord Scout House], that was a really hot dance at that time, really crowded and really popular. Those folks were basically seeking out different styles of tunes and different styles of music. When you worked with callers that's how you worked. So the caller would say, Play something driving like an old time tune, or play something bouncy like a French Canadian tune, or play something smooth like an Irish tune. So that was basically the language that a lot of different callers used to describe the feel that they wanted for the dance and so that's what I did. I just pursued all those styles of music. I don't think of myself as an old time fiddler, or an Irish fiddler or French Canadian fiddler. Although I try to sort of bring out elements of those styles when I play but I really think of myself as a New England player. That's really my roots.

Julie Vallimont

Do you play New England tunes?

Dave Langford

Absolutely. Yeah. I love New England tunes like Temperance Reel, for example. That is something in the Latter Day Lizards we'd call the old way. And so more often than not, when we're just starting the night, we'll say Well, how do you want to start and somebody will say, oh, let's start old way and that's Temperance Reel. But you know, Growling Old Man, Grumbling Old Woman, I love to play that tune. There's just so many. Anything out of the New England Fiddler's Repertoire. It's like that's really the bible. And also chestnuts like Money Musk, Petronella, Opera Reel, tunes like that.

Julie Vallimont

It's interesting how having an identity as a New England fiddler can mean a few different things. Like it could be someone who plays only New England tunes in the old style. Or it could be someone who plays contra dances and plays all these different genres. Which I feel like is very common in contra dancing now, like that is now the quintessential New England fiddler is somebody who does a little bit of everything.

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Dave Langford

Exactly. Yes. I do think that that was encouraged by callers, right? Because the callers know that part of having a successful evening is to have variety in the dances and variety in the music. And so I think a good caller will try to get that from a band, right? Try to get some different moods from the band.

Julie Vallimont

So, you think as bands started incorporating Irish tunes and other genres into their playing, the callers started picking up on that, and kind of changing what they were asking for, or started matching dances and tunes that way?

Dave Langford

Yep. I do think that. I think that that started in the 1980s. I could be wrong about that but I think that was all happening in the 1980s.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that timing seems right, from people talking about the early days of [Swallowtail](#) or [Wild Asparagus](#) or Fresh Fish, or a lot of other bands that were bringing in these other genres of tunes like Irish music into the contra dance repertoire.

Dave Langford

Yes, definitely. I remember one of the years that I went to Augusta, Swallowtail was there and there was a band called [Critton Hollow](#) that was there as well. Critton Hollow did a fantastic spoof on Swallowtail. Where they tried to be like... Critton Hollow plays old time music and that's pretty much all they play. So they just sort of hunker down and play the tune. But they worked out some tune where they worked in all sorts of different things like tearing paper as a transition. Like, the sound of tearing paper to go from one tune to the other, or banging trash can lids together. Or they just came up with all these different ... and it was a very loving spoof on Swallowtail, it was fantastic.

Julie Vallimont

So would they actually tear paper in front of a microphone?

Dave Langford

Absolutely, yeah.

Julie Vallimont

So they would bang a trash can, like in real life during a transition. That's pretty funny. Yeah, because obviously contra music also switched to this kind of high drama mode that we occupy a lot of our time in today which it didn't necessarily used to be. Like, exciting transitions and dramatic tune shifts, and all sorts of stuff like that.

Dave Langford

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Well I think there's a lot of parts of the country where people play old time music and it doesn't change a lot. You know, they start the tune and they just play the tune as many times as the dance goes and then it's done. So when you go to a part of the country like that with a New England band, who's doing all sorts of dynamics, and all sorts of different styles and moods people really do enjoy it.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. When thinking about your fiddle style, since you kind of play all these different styles of tunes in a sort of New England way, how has that affected your fiddle playing over the years? Like, do you know, Oh, I do this thing from old time, and I do this thing in my bowing from Québécois. Like, do you think about it in that way?

Dave Langford

A little bit. Yeah, there's things from old time fiddling. For example, one of the things I learned from Bruce Molsky was to play near the frog a lot. That's a place that a lot of old time players played down at the bottom of the bow like that. You get a lot of power at the frog, because that's where your hand is. So it's the weight of your hand and the weight of the bow is all there, as opposed to at the tip where you just really have the tip of the bow, which is really light. I do think that after I played more and more old time music I started playing down near the frog more. It also allows you to do very rhythmic things with the bow. So your hand is like a fulcrum and you can change the position of your hand very easily when you're close to the frog, and that allows you to do some very rhythmic and almost percussive things with the bow when you're doing accompaniment or even when you're playing the tune.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, because your fiddle style is so fun. It's like just a powerhouse. You're just chugging along and it is very rhythmic and you accompany things in this whole fun way that I don't see a lot of other people do. Like, first of all you actually strum the fiddle sometimes. You literally turn it sideways and strum with your fingers.

Dave Langford

That's true.

Julie Vallimont

Where did that come from?

Dave Langford

That's a really good question. I don't recall how I started doing that but I agree. It's something that I do a lot now and it's not something that I see a lot of other fiddle players doing. What I do is actually, I use one finger so it's just my index finger on the right hand. So on the way down, the nail is hitting the strings, and on the way back up, it's just the soft part. It's almost like a banjo uke sound. It's like banjo uke goes, wukka wukka. That kind of sound. I could actually demonstrate a little bit.

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Julie Vallimont

Yeah, demonstration time! Besides we have to hear this fiddle that we've heard so much about. [Dave strums his fiddle with his fingers a few times.]

Dave Langford

So this is just really one finger, just my index finger. And it's strumming kind of over the fingerboard. I wouldn't strum where the bow goes because that's covered with rosin, and so you get rosin all over your finger. Just as you need rosin to play with the bow, rosin is bad when you're trying to strum, so I'm playing more up the fingerboard to where the neck meets the body of the fiddle. [Dave plays an upbeat strumming pattern on his fiddle with his fingers.]

Julie Vallimont

So fun. And you do that with your fiddle in standard tuning, do you ever cross tune it?

Dave Langford

I do cross tune to play certain tunes. So I'll cross tune to A or cross tune in a D tuning or in a G tuning. For strumming it doesn't really matter how the fiddle is tuned because you're just playing a lot of octaves and chord tones and so you can do that. You can strum no matter how the fiddle's tuned.

Julie Vallimont

That's cool. How about other things that have affected like your bowing? Do you play with a lot of double stops like they would in old time music?

Dave Langford

I do. Yeah, absolutely. That's kind of accompaniment as well.

Julie Vallimont

And then playing French Canadian tunes, do you change your bowing at all when you do that, or Irish tunes?

Dave Langford

Yes. So one thing, it's kind of a small thing that I learned from some workshops with [Lisa Ornstein](#), was that repeated bows on the same string can kind of mimic the sound of the accordion. So accordionists do that a lot when they just play, [Dave imitates the sound of four notes in rapid succession], like, you know, 1 2 3 4, but it's all the same note. It's a very accordionistic thing. I play for example, Céline is a Canadian tune that I learned from Lisa Ornstein and it has that at the end of the phrase. You just play 1 2 3 4 and it's all the same note, and it's four separate very percussive bows.

Julie Vallimont

Can you play that for us? I love that tune by the way, such a happy tune. [Dave plays Céline, ending with those four repeated bows]. Yeah, you know that reminds me of the sound of those older recordings from Québec, like the old style ones. Such a great sound.

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Dave Langford

It's a good sound and it's really great for dancing, because it's super rhythmic so you can really stomp to it.

Julie Vallimont

So we could talk about repertoire, and this whole conversation we could have about like, do you need one tune, or do you want a medley? And how do you do it, how do you pick tunes? Watching you and your various bands, you all like to have fun with one tune for a long time which is really fun. So tell us a little bit about your thinking and approach to that.

Dave Langford

Well, I think the one tune ethic came out of the Latter Day Lizards.

Julie Vallimont

That's you and Kate Barnes and Bill Tomczak just for reference for folks.

Dave Langford

Yes. When we started playing, which was in 1997, we were doing more medleys and I think a lot of bands at the time were just playing medleys. That band is very improvisatory. So everybody likes to improvise and have a good time with a tune. What we found was that more and more, as we played together, we weren't getting to the second tune, and we never got to a third tune. We would start playing and then we'd be having a great time and then all of a sudden, the caller would say okay, three more times. And we'd say, Well, we didn't do our second tune and after a while, we just kind of gave up on the second. So occasionally we will play a second tune but mostly we just play one. We have two recordings with that band. The first one was in 2002, Sleeping on A Rock. And there's more medleys on that recording and there's a few single tunes, but we did do a number of medleys. And then on the second recording, which we made in 2008, I don't think there's even one medley. I'd have to look but there's not many. As a result of that, I think we got better at creating lots of different moods with one tune, and lots of sections, and lots of different feels. It's not uncommon for people to come up to us after a dance and say, what was that second tune?

Julie Vallimont

[Jokingly] I love when you change tunes in the middle.

Dave Langford

But it was really just a mood change and like any improvisational approach, some of the stuff that we do works, to us, amazingly well, and then some of the stuff just fails and then we think Well, okay, we won't do that again. But I think being willing to fail is necessary.

Julie Vallimont

Absolutely. So imagine that you are playing Temperance Reel for 10 minutes straight. What are some of the kinds of things that might happen during that 10 minutes with the three of you?

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Dave Langford

So, first of all, not playing the melody. So we wouldn't play the the actual tune Temperance Reel, we'd play something that resembled Temperance Reel and kind of had a nod to Temperance Reel, but it was really something else that fit the chord changes. So that's one thing. Another thing could be trading between, for example, Bill Tomczak and myself might trade the melody back and forth or trade improvisations back and forth so that's another thing that you could do. A rhythm break, you know, one time through and there's no melody at all, and everybody's just doing something rhythmic or sitting out that time through. There's so many things that you can do, even alternate chord changes that's something else that you might hear.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, you could probably do just melody. Do you do feet while you play?

Dave Langford

I don't. My feet do a lot when I play.

Julie Vallimont

I was gonna say, when you watch you, they're doing stuff.

Dave Langford

They are but it's not necessarily the most rhythmic stuff if you put a mic on it. People often ask if I want them to mic my feet, I always politely decline. I think I do play better when I let my feet just do whatever they want to do. So that's kind of where that comes from, is that they're just doing their own thing. But it's not necessarily super rhythmic. It's not like classic French Canadian footwork.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, they do kind of this shuffley thing. I feel like playing rhythmically as a dance musician, it's obvious that you're feeling the rhythm in your whole body. I feel like anyone who's a good dance musician can tap into that feeling. It's not just coming out of your hands and your arms. It's like your whole body. It's like you're empathizing with the dancers, in a way by feeling the rhythm in your body as you're playing for them.

Dave Langford

Absolutely.

Julie Vallimont

It also looks fun. You know, it's like, if you look up on stage, and the band's having a good time, and they're dancing around up there too, definitely looks fun, adds to that environment.

Dave Langford

I think that makes a big difference when a band is having a really, really good time. I think that makes a huge difference for the dancers. That definitely happens with the Lizards, for sure. I

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think most of the bands that I'm lucky enough to play with, we have a lot of fun, because that's why we're doing it.

Julie Vallimont

That's right, it comes to that improvisatory spirit. When you're fiddling in front of dancers, what kind of things are you paying attention to, or thinking about when you're watching the hall? If you do that, I don't want to imply that you have to, but a lot of fiddlers do, so?

Dave Langford

I do. Yeah, absolutely. So, looking for a few different things, one is our tempo, right? Does it look like people are behind, meaning, behind the figures or behind the beat? Meaning you might be playing too fast. Or is it a little ploddy? Meaning you might be playing a little bit too slow. That kind of feedback really should come from the caller as well. I think most callers are looking for that kind of thing. But if I notice that I think maybe we're playing a little bit too fast I'll ask the caller, How's the tempo? Sometimes they'll just give you a big thumbs up and say, nope, it's great, don't worry. I don't think I would try to change the tempo without collaborating with the caller on that. But that's something. And then also just look for, are people grooving? Are they really having a good time? Are they really into it? And that's more about is the tune matching the dance really well. And that's a whole topic of matching a tune ...

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I was just about to ask you.

Dave Langford

So the way we do that in the Lizards is we read the dance card, first of all. So the caller will bring the card over to us and then we'll just both [Bill and Dave] look at it and read the figures. And then we'll say thank you, and the caller will take the card away because they need it to teach the dance usually. Then we both think about it and we're thinking about a few different things. One is obviously our repertoire, you know, the tunes that we know. But we're also thinking about, what did we just do? And what part of the night are we in, the first half or second half or say just before the break? Or kind of, what's the context of this particular dance, and then we think about the figures in that context, and then usually, we'll both come up with an idea, and then we sort of compare notes. Sometimes one of us might say Temperance Reel, and somebody else says Growling Old Man and Grumbling Old Woman, and then one of us might say, No, you're right, Growling and Grumbling, that's better for this dance, let's do that. Or many times we're thinking about the same tune. We often have the same idea and then it's great, because we know we've probably nailed it. And everybody has off nights and on nights as well. And so like some nights, I might just not be able to come up with any ideas and Bill might have a lot of great ideas and that's fantastic. Then maybe the next night, it'll be the other way around so you know, we kind of help each other.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that's why bands are great. Especially when you've worked with people for a long time you have a collective brain among all of you.

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Dave Langford

Exactly. Sometimes we'll say to Kate, We don't have any ideas, what do you want to do? So that's really it, but I think it's all rooted in the figures of the dance and not just necessarily where the balances are but just kind of the flow of the whole thing.

Julie Vallimont

Like all those different things, like chunky or long moves? Or are they walking a lot? Or all those kinds of things like, what's the choreography like? I like it when I'm looking at the card and the caller will tell me things about the storyline of the dance that I can't always see from looking at the card, like, Oh, you're away from your neighbor, or your partner, and then you get reunited later on, or there's this flirty moment with your shadow or whatever. It's helpful when they say things like that because it affects what you pick.

Dave Langford

Yeah, I love it, actually, when callers, they've got some kind of hint like they'll come over and say, this is very kind of steamy or something [Laughter]. It's their idea of the character of the dance. Some callers will write on the back of the card every time they work with a different band. A different band does a different tune or set of tunes, and so they might, you know, keep track of those on their card and say, Well, other bands have done A, B or C, those are possible tunes that I've seen work well for this list. Lisa Greenleaf actually has spent in the past a lot of time listening to recordings that she made of various bands to the extent that she knows your repertoire pretty well. And so, a program from Lisa, for most of the dances, will include, This is the tune that I want you to play. We love that because it just takes all the decision making out of it. She won't do that for all of them, like maybe there'll be a couple in there, it's like, your choice of this style, something like that. But a lot of the program will be there with tunes that she has, you know, listened to, recordings of you doing at dances with her, and has decided are a really good fit for this dance that she's going to do and that's fantastic.

Julie Vallimont

I feel like in a lot of bands, when you play a tune, and say you haven't arranged it, like you've never rehearsed it or just decided that it goes this way, after a while the tune falls into a way that you play it as a band. Like, this is always going to be happy major, and this one has a funky backbeat or whatever. How much do you do that? It's very hard for me, as a rhythm player, to approach the same tune a different way every time especially if it's the same fiddler playing. It always inspires me to want to accompany it the same way. Like does Temperance always sound the same? Do you ever play like a bluesy Temperance? Do you know what I mean ... or do you kind of treat it the same way and improvising around it every time?

Dave Langford

Good question. I would say that some tunes, you could approach a very different way, depending on a lot of the factors that we were talking about earlier, like where you are in the evening, and what kind of dance it is. So there are certain tunes that you could give different treatments to I think, for sure. When I think about Temperance, like if we start the evening with that a lot, then often we're going to play it similarly from night to night, because we want to start

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with a bang and we want to start with a lot of energy and not necessarily play it fast but give it a lot of energy and build it up so that by the end of it we're kind of wailing on it, so that it gets people really excited for the evening. Right out of the gate, to start with something that has a ton of energy and a ton of creativity and a lot of contrast where you really take it somewhere.

Julie Vallimont

We've been talking about Temperance so much maybe you should play it for us so we can hear what it sounds like. Would you be willing to do that?

Dave Langford

I could do that.

Julie Vallimont

We haven't even heard it yet. I hear it in my head because I've heard you play it before, but our listeners haven't.

Dave Langford

Let's see, maybe I'll do it a little bit lopey or something. [Dave plays Temperance at a moderate tempo].

Julie Vallimont

Great tune.

Dave Langford

It's a good tune for sure.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. I mean, that tune is interesting, because I feel like it kind of demands certain chords. But then also it doesn't, like you can sub out a lot of those chords for other things.

Dave Langford

Absolutely.

Julie Vallimont

I like tunes like that, where they ask gently for certain chords, but then you can do whatever you want so it gives you freedom. You can either play it straight, or you can kind of mess around with that.

Dave Langford

I think that tune is pretty wide open. There's a lot of different things that you could do harmonically.

Julie Vallimont

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I imagine if it's a tune that you play a lot with the Lizards, it's got to have lots of fodder for improvisation to last you 30 years or however long you're going to keep playing this tune. So I'm curious, in a band like the Lizards, since we've been talking about that, how many tunes are in your regular rotation? Especially if you only play one tune for a lot of dances, you're cutting in third the number of tunes that you have to play? Is it 20? 100?

Dave Langford

That's a really, really good question. I don't think I could answer it off the top of my head, I think, probably in terms of regular rotation it's probably, maybe a few dozen. But we all know a lot of tunes and so we can kind of reach in and there's lots of different tunes that we have, that we know. If we get into a certain situation, where we either get asked for that tune ... Like, for example, the Butterfly is not a tune that's in our regular rotation, but it's something that callers ask for from time to time, because there's a specific dance choreographed to it.

Julie Vallimont

It's a slip jig.

Dave Langford

Exactly, yeah. And so, sure, we'll play the Butterfly. Then there's other tunes that have unusual forms. There might be either a 48 bar tune, or a 40 bar tune, like Hell Broke Loose in Georgia. So again, we can't play Hell Broke Loose in Georgia every night because you need a dance. Probably a square dance that has a 40 bar form, but callers do have dances like that, and occasionally they'll whip around and ask for something like that and then we say, Oh, fun, okay, cool. We get to see what we have.

Julie Vallimont

Do you keep a setlist as a band?

Dave Langford

No. We used to.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that's the thing. The three of you, you all know so many tunes you've been playing for so long. You've got all sorts of tunes but I guess you never forget what tunes you know, or if you do somebody else will remember, right?

Dave Langford

Yeah. Stomp Rocket with Glen Loper and Bethany Waickman, that's a newer configuration. So we do have a setlist. We have a list of tunes that we work off of. So I think both approaches are fine but it's also good to go outside your setlist from time to time. Some tune just might come to one of us and then we'll say Hey how about this, do you know that one? And if everybody does then, you know, then we'll try it out.

Julie Vallimont

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What if everybody doesn't? Do you do it anyway sometimes?

Dave Langford

No, probably not.

Julie Vallimont

No.

Dave Langford

No, I mean everybody's got to feel comfortable.

Julie Vallimont

Unless somebody's game for that.

Dave Langford

Yeah.

Julie Vallimont

I guess with either of these bands you have to have enough tunes on your setlist to probably get through a dance weekend, it's probably a decent size setlist if you play a lot of dance weekends.

Dave Langford

Yeah, absolutely, but you can repeat tunes at a weekend too because at a weekend you're typically doing a couple evening dances and then maybe workshops during the days. And so we wouldn't do a ton of repeating of tunes but we might repeat one or two if we couldn't think of anything better the second time.

Julie Vallimont

Do you think the dancers notice? Do you think they ever notice? I feel like they don't a lot of the time.

Dave Langford

I agree with you. I think a lot of the time they don't, but some folks would. I mean, some folks do have favorite tunes. As I'm sure you've experienced, somebody will come running up to the stage after you play something and they'll just go, That's my favorite tune, thank you so much for playing that. Occasionally somebody will come up and say, You just played my favorite tune and I wasn't dancing can you play it again this weekend and let me know so that I can make sure that I've got a partner? And we'll say Sure, yeah, we'll do that because, you know, why not?

Julie Vallimont

There are a lot of dancers who listen to CDs of contra dance music or other kinds of fiddle music. They know the names of the tunes. A lot of them are musicians. But then there's dancers who don't know anything about the music. Like when I started contra dancing, I knew nothing

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about the music. I didn't know the difference between a jig or a reel or anything like that, and it's great that you don't have to know the music. I feel like in that case, people recognize grooves and arrangement treatments. Like, if you always play a tune with a halftime groove, they would notice if you repeat it because the groove would be the same. I'm a nerd about tunes, I love collecting them and having a giant list of them. I love not repeating things. It's almost like a challenge to me. Like, can you get through a weeklong camp and not repeat anything? But say there's a tune that you've worked out this cool sexy arrangement for with a riff or some big powerful thing, and then repeat it later on, but without the whole arrangement and all the underpinnings. Just let it be itself and bring out another aspect of the tune, that's really fun. Because sometimes tunes in arranged bands can get pigeonholed into one thing. A lot of these tunes, they have different sides of themselves that they want to reveal from time to time.

Dave Langford

Very true. I've noticed that beginning dancers, I think, have a hard time really hearing the music, because they're learning to do the dance, right? So it's almost like you can either listen to the caller or listen to the music. A number of people have talked to me about making that transition from a beginning dancer to a more intermediate dancer, let's say, and then all of a sudden realizing, Oh my goodness, there's this band up there and they're playing live music and it's really good! [Laughter] And then like, listening to the music too much, and then sort of missing the cues in the dance because they're listening to the music so hard. It's just kind of a fun, funny dynamic.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, they start noticing more details. Man, I remember when I was a new dancer. I mostly learned to dance at the Monday Yankee Ingenuity dance at the Scout House in Concord and then also at the Thursday VFW dance. I just remember every week at the Monday dance, I was so lost as a dancer. I was just trying to latch on to Kate Barnes's left hand like the basslines on the piano and Cal Howard on bass. That is what I latched on to as a dancer, like, the bass outlining the chords and just laying it all out cyclically you know, every time through the tune. I couldn't keep track of a reel, there are too many notes. Reels to me, in the beginning, sounded like you put a bunch of notes in the blender. [Laughter]. I couldn't follow them that fast. Now, of course, it's like after a while your brain learns to understand the patterns. It's like learning a language and once you speak it, it all makes sense but in the beginning, it didn't.

Dave Langford

Well, it's interesting to me, though, because you're a musician. You're coming at it as a musician with musical knowledge and sensibility and it was still hard for you to take it all in, right?

Julie Vallimont

Oh, totally. Absolutely. Yeah, it's interesting. Do you play for family dances or beginner dances or weddings or things like that?

Dave Langford

Absolutely.

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Julie Vallimont

Yeah, if you're playing for those kind of events, what do you do differently?

Dave Langford

Well, I think for family dances it's all just pretty simple, right? You just keep it really, really simple and really accessible. For about 10 years, probably the decade of the 2000s, I played a lot at [Ogontz Camp](#) in northern New Hampshire, where CDSS was running family weeks. I think the first one was in 1999 and then they ran one week a year for maybe three or four years. Then there was a big demand for family programs and they added a second week, and they did two weeks for maybe another five or six years. And then, I don't know, like this big group of kids got older or something, and the demand for family programs started falling off again. I did one or two of those family weeks, every summer for probably 10 years, including program directing three of those years with my wife Anne [Goodwin], and that was a blast. So we got to sort of run the show. We got to hire the staff and put the week together. And then once everybody got there we sort of ran the show, and made sure everything went smoothly and solved any problems. That was really, really, really wonderful. Those family weeks are so incredibly special. Probably my favorite thing about them is watching the different ages of kids interact with each other. Because the older kids, they start to take care of the younger ones and sort of try to make everything okay for them. It's just so, so cool to watch. Those family weeks are always very ... you know, big emotions. Just seeing all the amazing things that go on and how the kids do in that environment.

Julie Vallimont

So many fun times. I've never been to Ogontz Camp, but I've heard so many great things about it and people just talk about it as this beloved thing.

Dave Langford

It's very beautiful. It's a very, very beautiful part of New Hampshire, this very picturesque little lake, and very little else around besides just the camp.

Julie Vallimont

What a cool experience as a kid to get to go to a dance camp like that with your family. At least I think, maybe some kid's like Oh I have go to dance camp with my family and it's like the least cool thing in the world to them. I feel like some friends I know who grew up in the folk scene think it's uncool, but then they reach an age where it's cool again, and as an adult, they're like really glad they did it.

Dave Langford

Yep. I know what you mean.

Julie Vallimont

Did you ever go to NEFFA with your parents?

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Dave Langford

No.

Julie Vallimont

So you went there in utero.

Dave Langford

Yes, exactly. In fact, I think my parents had really stopped dancing. Aside from those few dances that I was talking about that we went to when we were kids in somebody's house, but they weren't going to regular dances. Once I got into college, and I started doing more dancing, I brought my dad to a New Year's Eve Dawn Dance and he danced all night and he drove home. [Laughter].

Julie Vallimont

Wow.

Dave Langford

He was unstoppable. That kind of got them back into it and they did quite a bit of dancing after that and my dad is still going to dances today in Connecticut. Right now there's a few dances back in business in Connecticut. Also he started working on the sound gear so he's kind of doing sound for the Hartford dances and also training other people up on how to do the sound.

Julie Vallimont

I totally forgot, my brain spaced but I've met your dad. I met him at Ralph Sweet's Powder Mill Barn where he came and I was playing there and someone else in the band was like, that's Dave Langford's dad. I think he was helping with the sound, that's so cool. That's nice you got him back into it.

Dave Langford

He loves to dance and really enjoys doing the sound work as well.

Julie Vallimont

So, how often do you play rhythm for contra dance, it's like we could switch and talk about guitar a little bit. For our listeners, Dave's in this lovely room that has two guitars and a fiddle in it.

Dave Langford

I haven't played tons of guitar. So, at the average Latter Day Lizards weekend, I might play guitar two or three times for specific numbers that I play guitar on. But recently, well pre-pandemic, I started doing some gigs with Sam Bartlett and Eric Schedler. [Supertrad](#) is their duo and then they have Supertrad with guests. So I've been a guest of Supertrad and we've done maybe some four or five dance weekends or something like that. And so working with them, I was playing about a third of the evening on guitar and that was really super fun for me, I really enjoyed that. Those guys both play a bunch of different instruments and so we can all trade around a lot on different instruments and it gave me more of a chance to play guitar than I

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usually do. The other thing about guitar is that I've been really focused on guitar during the pandemic, I've been playing less fiddle and playing more guitar.

Julie Vallimont

What kind of things do you play when you're by yourself?

Dave Langford

So I think I'm currently playing Time Will End, a Jeremiah McLane tune.

Julie Vallimont

That's a good tune.

Dave Langford

This Part of the World, beautiful Rachel Bell waltz. Tom Kruskal's which is a beautiful tune that is used a lot for English dances.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, Emily Troll and Amelia Mason.

Dave Langford

Exactly, and so that's really fun to play. This is a lot of F tunes. [Laughter].

Julie Vallimont

Do you like playing F tunes? Oh, I see you're capoed actually. You're capoed to the fifth fret on the guitar behind you.

Dave Langford

Yeah, that guitar is in standard. I made up a few tunes on guitar so that's been fun too. I've also been working on, both in DADGAD and in standard, just playing melodies for more tunes, sort of the flat picking. I could play a tune I made up if you like?

Julie Vallimont

Oh, I'd love to hear that.

Dave Langford

So this guitar is in standard. This is called Running the Ridge. [Dave plays a flatpicked guitar tune].

Julie Vallimont

That is a sweet tune.

Dave Langford

Thank you.

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Julie Vallimont

It just sounds so beautiful, the guitar has a really nice tone.

Dave Langford

Yeah, that's a Martin 000-16.

Julie Vallimont

Have you had that guitar for a long time?

Dave Langford

Yes probably like 25 years or something like that.

Julie Vallimont

It sounds like an old friend when you play it. That's great. Man, that's something that we don't get to hear. Now I want to just hear you play guitar all the time, forget fiddles. I love your fiddling, but at dances we only get to hear like one aspect of somebody's musicality. And then there's all these fun things about people that we don't get to hear. Will you play guitar for us for like another hour? We'll have like, Contra Pulse bonus edition. [Laughter].

Dave Langford

I could break out my other guitar which is my new guitar. It's a Martin OM-45.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, is that one in DADGAD?

Dave Langford

That one is in DADGAD. I always wanted a fancy guitar. So I ordered this from the Music Emporium in Lexington in January, and it arrived in July.

Julie Vallimont

Beautiful blonde guitar with some inlays around the outside.

Dave Langford

So it's Mexican Rosewood, also called Cocobolo. Then Koa wood binding, sort of Koa around the edges and a Koa strip in the back.

Julie Vallimont

Oh, that's beautiful.

Dave Langford

So this is This Part of the World by Rachel Bell. [Dave plays a slow beautiful waltz on guitar].

Julie Vallimont

Beautiful.

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Dave Langford

Thank you.

Julie Vallimont

Lovely tune, well played, I felt moved. It's like you get that feeling of oh, that is just what I needed and I didn't even know I needed that and that was so good. It made me feel so nice. That's one of the things I love about contra dancing. It's like, you're like, oh, go dancing, and then you get there and you're like, that is just what I needed. Right? And you don't even know. A lot of us miss that feeling so much. Because it's been like two years now, almost. Almost two years, not quite, but a year and a half. Thank you for that moment.

Dave Langford

You're more than welcome.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, and Rachel Bell has a tune book named after that tune it sounds like.

Dave Langford

Exactly.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, a lot of great tunes on there. It's neat that during this time, when you haven't been playing for dances, you've been exploring these dance tunes, or other tunes by composers who write dance tunes, and playing them on the guitar and just having quiet time with them.

Dave Langford

When all the dancing stopped a year ago, in March, I felt for a while, like, what was the point of getting the fiddle out? I don't know. I was sad about it. Dozens and dozens of things that were on the calendar, all of a sudden were dropping off. And so I just kind of focused on the guitar for a while and that was a good thing to do. I've been getting back to fiddle some and done a few gigs recently. Which was two weddings in Vermont this fall, interestingly enough. Both of them were very remote areas of Vermont at the ends of dirt roads at farmhouses. And, you know small crowds of people and very well ventilated barns and it all felt pretty safe. It was really, really wonderful to play for dancing again. It was really amazing.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah. I can only imagine. You know, it's coming back in trickles. Some people feel ready and some people feel not ready, both from the musicians and the organizers and the dancers. Yeah, it's coming back. But we still have a little ways to go before it would feel like full on, go without thinking about it. Some people I talk to aren't playing music at all. Other people are playing music a little differently and so it's good that you still have that connection. Yeah, wow, I totally lost my train of thought, now. I just love the sound of that guitar, you hypnotize me and I forgot how to talk. What were we talking about? [Laughter].

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Dave Langford

Couldn't have been important. [Laughter].

Julie Vallimont

What do you think's gonna happen with music in the future in terms of tunes, like all these new tunes coming along, do you like to learn new tunes? Where do you get tunes from?

Dave Langford

I do like to learn new tunes. I think a lot of the new tunes come from people that are creating them. Some of my favorite tunes in recent years are newly composed tunes like William Blake's Dead by Rodney Miller. Like Da Lounge Bar is another one that I really like. Jeremiah McLane has a fairly new-ish tune called April and Joe's that I really enjoy, it's an A tune. I did do a couple of weeks at Pinewoods this summer, kind of in the lull between July and August, when things were feeling a little safer for a while. CDSS ran some programs at Pinewoods and CDS Boston ran the July 4th weekend. There was kind of a mix of musical veterans like me and younger players and I love the younger players. They're fantastic musicians and fantastic people and I don't know where they're gonna take this music, but it's gonna be somewhere good, I think.

Julie Vallimont

That's so cool. You write tunes from time to time. What's your process like? Do they just sort of come out?

Dave Langford

Yes, exactly. That's exactly what happens. I have never sat down to write a tune. One of them called Billy in the Rearview, I wrote when I was actually at Ogontz camp. I was having some trouble with my sound, it was either my pickup or there was something that was going wrong with the system. I don't quite remember, but whoever was doing sound there knew that I was having trouble and said, Dave, let's just go over to the hall and sit down and you play some stuff and I'm going to try to troubleshoot what's going on with this gear. While I was sitting there and he was troubleshooting, I just started noodling and that tune Billy in the Rearview came out.

Julie Vallimont

That's a fun tune.

Dave Langford

It's also the same with that tune that I just played, Running the Ridge that came out after I'd been doing a lot of different flat picking, working on a lot of different flat picking tunes. I don't remember exactly how, but I just started playing it, I played the A part, and I thought, well, that's nice. And then I thought, well, what would the B part sound like to that? And again, it just kind of popped out. It's almost more like the tune reveals itself to you as opposed to that you're creating something, at least for for me. And then you just have to hope that it's not a tune that anybody's already written that you're just remembering.

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Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's like by working on, say, flat picking, your hands are like absorbing all these patterns from all these different tunes and your brain is soaking in the sound of all these things and then they get rearranged and they get filtered through you and then they come out in some new way, right?

Dave Langford

Yes, exactly.

Julie Vallimont

Or it's a tune that already exists, which we've also all done. Oh, those patterns filtered through my hands a little too unchanged from how they went in there. [Laughter]. So, I remember the days of Big Bandemonium back in the day. This is a band with horns, lots of people on stage and a more arranged sound. I just remember hearing that band at Greenfield at the Guiding Star Grange, just the wall of sound, the energy, what was that like?

Dave Langford

It was phenomenal. I would say the most phenomenal thing about it was watching how people danced to the Big Bandemonium. We had one medley which was starting with a D minor jig, and maybe just three times through this pretty standard nice D minor Irish jig, and people are dancing, like the way they normally dance. And then we went into I Found a New Baby, the swing tune, with this massive full horn arrangement and all these harmonies and the whole band just shifts into high gear and people kind of almost jumped out of their skin. It was really just amazing to watch. Just like the whole way they held their bodies changing, the way they interacted changed and it was an incredible, incredible thing. The Bandemonium did go to Portland, Oregon one year and Kim Appleberry, who runs that weekend, sent me a clip pretty recently that I had never seen before of the Bandemonium in Portland and so I'll share it with you, Julie, you can post it along with this so people can take a look at it.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, that'd be so fun.

Dave Langford

Yeah. But the Bandemonium was fantastic. One thing about it was that when we started there were three fiddles, which was Van Kaynor, Becky Tracy and me. Playing in a band with two other fiddle players was just a gas. It was just so much fun. We did make a recording called the Big Bang, and when we made that recording, we got to work out all these really nice three part harmonies and just had such a really fun time together doing that. And then Lise Brown, who was the band leader and did many of the arrangements. [She] is an amazing player, but also an amazing arranger and created these ... Some of the arrangements were more like swing tunes, but some of them were just for fiddle tunes. Actually, she did do an arrangement for Billy in the Rearview, which was fantastic. The power of that band was so remarkable and incredible, it was really, really fun to be part of.

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Julie Vallimont

Who did you have as the rhythm section?

Dave Langford

So at the beginning, I think Keith Murphy was part of the rhythm session, and I think Corey DiMario played bass, and Kate Barnes played piano. I think at some point, Keith and Becky got too busy so Van and I stayed just as two fiddles. So we didn't get another fiddle player. I think at that point Ann Percival joined and it had a bit of a different sound, but it was really good. Ann was part of the Portland, Oregon Bandemonium. I think Mark Hellenberg (Pokey) was on that date too. I think that might have been the only Bandemonium that we had drums for and it was really it was really amazing.

Julie Vallimont

It's over the top, there's just nothing like it. All these different things you can contra dance to. Was there sheet music? Were the arrangements written out like horn parts and stuff?

Dave Langford

Yes. So the horn players all had books and they played right from the books. And then for some of the tunes the fiddle players had sheet music, some of them we didn't, some of them we didn't need it. But a bunch of it was reading for sure.

Julie Vallimont

Man, just listening to the three of you play triple fiddles. I remember that lineup, back then I used to dance to you guys, that was so fun. Because often it's double fiddle where there's a melody person and then the other person is either unison or harmony. But the third person is the wildcard, right? The third person could do anything they want to. Fun moments. Well, this has been really great to talk with you and just think about all this stuff. Are there any other things you want to talk about? Anything else you want to add while we're here?

Dave Langford

No, I think we covered a lot, Julie. I really appreciate you and our time here and really appreciate talking to you about all of this stuff.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, it's been fun to think about and I look forward to hearing whatever your secret surprise is that Stomp Rocket has planned for us. You know, we didn't talk about Stomp Rocket a lot. Here's the epilogue, which is, man, I haven't had the chance to hear Stomp Rocket a lot because you guys haven't been around for that long and our paths just haven't crossed because you're mostly at dance weekends and I'm at different dance weekends. But, Glen is a fun improviser. I imagine Bethany's holding down the fort on the guitar but Glen must be a fun person to play with, what's that dynamic like?

Dave Langford

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Oh, it's fantastic. Glen manages to put an extraordinary amount of energy into the mandolin that really creates a really big sound on the mandolin. Which is just really, really fun to kind of combine the fiddle and the mandolin when it's just a really strong and powerful mandolin sound. But we also like to listen to each other and to kind of take elements for what each other are doing and toss things back and forth. It's a wonderful combination, we really have a great time with it.

Julie Vallimont

You know, one of these days, I hope to have Glen on Contra Pulse, so he can talk about this himself. But when we were talking about that initial question about identity, I kind of think of Glen as sort of a New England musician as well. He plays so many different styles of tunes, he plays Irish or old time, he plays them all really well. But it's fun to think of the two of you playing together. It's kind of like you got that New England vibe going on playing all these different tunes.

Dave Langford

Yeah, I'd be interested to hear what Glen has to say about that.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, I wonder, to be continued.

Dave Langford

But definitely Stomp Rocket as a trio, it's a very joyful and very fun combination. I feel really fortunate to be working with those guys and hanging out too.

Julie Vallimont

Yeah, good hang. Oh, man, I can't wait to hear what you guys have cooked up. Well, thank you so much for your time today. This has been so wonderful.

Dave Langford

Thanks so much, Julie.

Julie Vallimont

Take care.

Dave Langford

Take care. Bye.

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

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